

学戦都市

05.
覇凰決戦
はおうけつせん

三屋咲ゆう
illustration: okiura



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学戦都市 アズラ

05. 覇凰決戦
はおうけつせん

アルディア
&
リムジヤ

沙々宮紗夜
&
刀藤綺凜

エリガット・フォースター
&
ドロテガ・レムス

天霧綾斗
&
クリス・アレグリア・
コング・リースフェルト



アルルカント・アカデミー

エルネスタ・キューネ *Ernesta Kuhne*

アルルカントが誇る落星工学の天才。《人形派》筆頭。

カミラ・パレート *Camilla Pareto*

専門分野は煌式武装の研究開発。エルネスタとは腐れ縁の仲。《獅子派》筆頭。

アルディ *"Absolute Refusal" Defended type*

エルネスタによって作られた自律式擬形体AR-D

リムシイ *"Ruinous Might" Cannon type*

エルネスタによって作られた自律式擬形体RM-C



レヴォルフ黒学院

ディルク・エーベルヴァイン *Dirk Eberwein*

《悪辣の王》と称される悪魔的頭脳を持つ青年。レヴォルフ初の非《星脈世代》生徒会長。

樫丸ころな *[かしまる・ころな]*

生徒会長秘書。序列外。《星脈世代》だが戦闘能力は皆無。

イレネ・ウルサイス *Irene Urzalz*

序列三位。《吸血暴姫》の二つ名を持つ。

プリシラ・ウルサイス *Priscilla Urzalz*

序列外。イレネの妹で、非常に珍しい再生能力者。



聖ガラードワース学園

アーネスト・フェアクロフ *Ernest Fairclough*

聖ガラードワース学園の生徒会長。序列一位。二つ名は《聖騎士》。

レティシア・ブランシャール *Leotitia Blanchard*

聖ガラードワース学園の生徒会副会長。序列二位。二つ名は《光翼の魔女》。

エリオット・フォースター&ドロテオ・レムス

Elliot Forster & Dorothea Lemus

準決勝で綾斗たちと対戦したガラードワース学園の生徒。序列十二位・十一位。



界龍第七学院

范 星璃 *[ファン・シンルー]*

界龍第七学院の生徒会長。九歳。序列一位。《万有天羅》の二つ名を持ち、アスタリスク屈指の戦闘力を誇る。

趙 虎峰 *[ジャオ・フーフォン]*

序列五位。稀代の拳士にして星露の弟子。二つ名は《天奇武葬》。

黎 沈雲・黎 沈華 *[リー・シェンユン/リー・シェンファ]*

双子の兄妹であり、序列九位（沈雲）と十位（沈華）。二つ名は《幻映創起》と《幻映霧散》。

宋・羅 *[ソン・ルオ]*

五回戦で綾斗たちと対戦した星璃の門下生。序列二十位・二十三位。



クインヴェール女学園

シルヴィア・リュネハイム *Sylvia Lynneheim*

クインヴェール女学園生徒会長にして序列一位。《戦律の魔女》の二つ名を冠する、前《王竜星武祭》準優勝者。

その他

マディアス・メサ *Madiath Mesa*

《星武祭》運営委員長。各学園のスポンサーである複数の統合企業財体から全権を任されている。

梁瀬ミーコ *[やなせ・ミーコ]*

《鳳凰星武祭》の実況アナウンサー。クインヴェールOG。

ファム・ティ・チャム *Pham Thi Tram*

《鳳凰星武祭》の解説。界龍OG。二十五歳。

フローラ・クレム *Flora Klemm*

ユリスが支援している孤児院の女の子。十歳。

天露 遥 *[あまぎり・はるか]*

綾斗の姉。五年前に失踪。

Chapter 1 - The First Semifinal Match

"—I see. No wonder Camilla-sama is that interested to you, Sasamiya Saya."

Rimsi who slowly stood up within the cloud of dust said so and thuddingly brushed up her hair.

The light bullet shot by Saya should have definitely been a direct hit, but judging from her appearance, she did not feel damage at all.

But, upon close inspection, the huge gun type Lux which Rimsi was holding in her hand was destroyed. Seemingly, she abruptly used it as a shield to defend against the attack.

Which means that Rimsi did not have a function to deploy a defensive barrier like Ardi after all.

Though that was also guessed from her outward appearance, perhaps Rimsi was a long-range attack type specialized in mobility and Ardi was a close range attack type specialized in defense.

"I admire your technique to control that extremely unstable Lux with such precision. What's more, it was a more than a perfect timing on top of having completely seen through my attack. That was really wonderful."

Rim said with an unusually calm tone and a cold expression.

"Though it will be repeating what Kirin had said just now to that big junk^[1]. Your attacks are based on accurate, perfect predictions. But, that's why it's easy to deal with them."

"...All right. The reason why Master gave us a personality and a heart was so that we could also taste such humiliation. Those words of yours, I have certainly carved them in my heart."

As Saya curtly answered with Waldenholt's muzzle still turned towards Rimsi, Rimsi slightly frowned and threw away the remains of the Lux which she held in her hands.

At the same time, the huge unit which she carried on her back activated and emitted a green light while letting a high-pitched tone resound.

"In that case, I shall respond with all my might."

When Rimsi said so, a gun type Lux appeared again in her right hand and her body lightly floated. And, as a conspicuously big green light swelled up, Rimsi soared up in the air at an intense speed.

『U,Uh-oh, player Rimsi flew!? She flew!』

『S-So that thing on her back was a flight unit. Those with flight ability are not so rare, but it's a different story when it comes to players able to pile up training of only doing full battles freely in the sky.』

While hearing the voices of the live reporter and the commentator, Saya chased Rimsi's figure with her gaze.

Certainly among the Strega and Dante, there were those who could fly freely by application of the ability (actually, it was also so for Julis), and even without a size like that of Rimsi's flight unit, personal flight modules could be put in practical use.

But as the commentator said, it was another issue when it came to the question of whether or not they could become useful in combat. Of course, basically it worked advantageously to take a position higher than the opponent, but if one could not cope with the movements of a Starpulse Generation on the ground, such advantage had no meaning.

—However.

"...!"

Rimsi's mobility in the sky was without a doubt overwhelming. Even describing it by saying "like a bird" would be halfhearted. Chasing the tire track which the green jet light depicted in the air was the best one could do.

"Well then, let's go."

At the same time the green straight line crossed the sky, light bullets poured literally like rain.

Although she somehow tried to apply her aim while dodging them, Rimsi was no longer there.

Grasping the movements of Rimsi —who was flying in the sky in a way just short of impossible, and moreover, her sudden braking and acceleration which could not be endured by a human— was making predictive shooting difficult.

"...This is troublesome." Although while saying that, Saya was chuckling.

That's right. There will be no meaning if it's not like that. If the form of Camilla Pareto's conviction was the weapons wielded by those puppets, then she would win by defeating all those with the weapons her father had made.

It was for that reason that Saya had won her way up to there.

"—"

She muttered in a small voice and poured Mana into the Mana Dite. At the same time; the muzzle of Waldenholt was concentrating a huge amount of energy which formed a restrictive force field. It, which shone, repelled the light bullets shot by Rimsi like a shield.

While maintaining to the very limit until the force field broke down, Saya set her aim.

"...Here."

As she began to shoot a huge light bullet from the right gun barrel, it easily swallowed Rimsi's bullets which were already fired towards Saya. There was just too much difference in output between Saya's Waldenholt and the gun used by Rimsi.

Rimsi evaded it while twisting her body, but Saya shot another light bullet from the left gun barrel at that exact time.

No matter how high Rimsi's mobility was in the air was, if she were made to take an evasive action after the first aim, her movements would be limited to some extent. What was left was to snipe at there.

This also was similar to what Kirin had said earlier. Exactly because Rimsi's reaction to the opponent's attack movements was too precise, it was easy to lead her on.

Actually, the light bullet shot by Saya was a direct hit course —But.

Just before that, a dull explosion sound echoed and Saya's light bullet exploded and scattered.

"Hmm...?"

Saya unintentionally frowned at that sight.

It should be nearly impossible to intercept Waldenholt's attack with the power of the Lux which Rimsi was using.

(How on earth...?)

Saya strained her eyes while being still cautious.

As the blast cleared up before long, there was the figure of Rimsi greatly sticking out her left hand forward there. But, her left arm had changed a part from the elbow to the tip into a huge gun barrel.

On Rimsi's delicate body, the unbalanced, huge gun seemed to have changed as if only that part was a heteromorphic monster.

"Did you think that I'm just an incompetent puppet which could only fly in the air? Even that superficial and thoughtless blockhead was given the absolute shield of defensive barrier. Don't you find it strange that I wasn't granted that much from Master?"

Though Rimsi's tone was indifferent, it was somewhat boastful.

"...Not that much. Huh."

While Saya muttered so, Saya quickly checked the data projected onto the aim monitor. Even judging from the energy's flow, it was not an armament held on hand, but probably Rimsi's built-in weapons. In other words, that energy should have been supplied by the multiple Mana Dites which was Rimsi's source of power and which were processed and were standing abreast. If so then, it would not be strange even if it flicked out only the output which surely offset Waldenholt.

"Let's see... This Ruinsharif is, so to speak, an absolute spear."

An absolute shield and an absolute spear.

In that case, by all means I would like to crash both of them into each other, but—.

"...As expected, it looks like it would be tough."

As she sent a sideway glance for an instant, Ardi and Kirin were ruthlessly competing intensively near the center of the stage. But, Rimsi had not so far taken a position in which she was behind them; Saya as well. While both were concentrated on the opponents in front each other, they also kept a close eye on their tag partner. If they were to relax their attention

even a little, it would jeopardize not only themselves, but their tag partner as well.

Since both Rimsi and Kirin were in charge of the rear, it might be said that it was a matter of course.

"Well, still there's no problem. Let's go with a contest of strength."

A direct confrontation was exactly what she wanted from the beginning.



Energy concentrated on the muzzles of Saya's Waldenholt and Rimsi's Ruinsharif.

"Ruinsharif — Shoot."

"...Kaboom"

The next moment, the two light bullets shot by Saya's both arms and the torrent of light which gushed out from Rimsi's left arm clashed just at a halfway point of both. An earsplitting roaring sound and a blast as if to blow off one's body swirled.

"Both attacks vanished, huh. You aren't bad."

"...I returned you those words."

While shaking their hair to the blast, Rimsi's and Saya's looks clashed.

Saya and Rimsi somewhere looked alike.

Either of them hardly revealed their emotions as they did not show that much change in their expression. However, sooner or later, strong and unyielding feelings would emit a clear heat.

"..."

Both of them, remaining silent as is, re-set their weapons almost at the same time.

—On the other side.

"Haaah!"

"Nuuh!"

Kirin's Senbakiri described an arc and approached Ardi, and Ardi's Hammer flipped it up. Kirin sneaked around to his back and once again slashed with an overhead chop, but she was blocked by the defensive barrier and the edge of her sword had not reached even slightly. Even so, Kirin's sword slashed without stopping, even for an instant, and each connected to the next slash, on and on like a flow.

『Now then, looking towards the center of the stage, player Toudou's amazing consecutive attacks continue here! Player Ardi seemed to barely

defend against them; he just one-sidedly defends without even being able to counterattack!』

『So this is the "Conjoined Cranes" of the Toudou style whose rumor I hear about. Hmm. I see, I see, it really gives no opportunity to counterattack.』

—"Conjoined Cranes".

It was the hidden technique of the Toudou style which Kirin learned, but it was not just pointing to one skill. An unending sequence of attacks which combined variants of chained skills and never ceased until the opponent had been cut was what "Conjoined Cranes" was.

"Fuhahahaha! What a terrifying sword skill, Toudou Kirin! It's exactly a divine skill... No, the skill of a demon! To think that I of all people could not find even an opening to counterattack!"

While dodging Kirin's fierce attacks by a hairbreadth, Ardi laughed very happily.

"But, nice, nice! So this is what humans call exaltation! I can't bear it! Even you can understand, right? That by dodging that one sword, I'm learning and evolving! Wonderful! You are the best mentor!"

Kirin did not respond to it, and unleashed a stab as to scoop out. The edge of the sword which swerved its trajectory by grazing the defensive barrier shaved Ardi's shoulder, but — it was shallow.

Although she then rotated her body and moved down her trunk as to draw a circle while tightening her flank, her blow was blocked by the hammer as if it was completely predicted.

(As expected... A pattern showed once won't work again, huh.)

Kirin slightly knitted her brows, but of course, Kirin's sword would not be stopped with that much. After all, being able to link attacks from any stance or any situation was what "Conjoined Cranes" was.

However, she just reconfirmed that Ardi's words of earlier were certainly true.

—Ardi was evolving at a dreadful speed also while dodging the sword like this.

There was apparently no doubt about it.

(The combination from "Kumanri^[2]" to "Reed Warbler" is now useless... Connecting from "Fūran^[3]" to "Saotome" is also dangerous...)

The Toudou style has 49 variants of chained skills. When incorporating basic skills in these combinations, the pattern becomes endless. However, while swinging her katana, Kirin realized that it was being shaved little by little.

Originally, it was near to impossible for someone to perfectly deal with a technique he saw just once at the second time. Such a thing was probably impossible even for Ayato. This was because the human was a creature who let his body pile up, little by little, what he learned by repetition.

But, this opponent was different.

He only needed the data of an attack executed just once, and was already able to cope with it.

(I must also take back the words I said earlier...)

Kirin floated a small wry smile while continuing "Conjoined Cranes".

Although she pointed out 'the fact that he's a machine is his weak point' to Ardi, the high level of this learning ability was obviously 'his strong point precisely because he is a machine'. In addition, Kirin was right now letting him pile up the combat experience which he was lacking.

Even his movements, which were just merely fast and accurate in the beginning when he wielded the hammer, suddenly began to become sharp and each blow became more and more heavy.

However, even so, Kirin did not feel like losing.

Kirin had no confidence in anything other than her sword skill, but conversely speaking, she had absolute confidence only in her sword skill. It was not about talent or ability, but about the confidence which she had piled up every day until today.

No matter how remarkable the rapidity of growth of Ardi was, the ability difference with Kirin in close range combat was still overwhelming, and it was not something which could be covered (filled) that easily.

—And...

"But well! No matter how exceptional data I got, it's not fun at all to be one-sidedly beaten like this...!" As Ardi said so, he forcibly threw his body to push Kirin aside and then greatly swung his Hammer.

Naturally, if one was to make such a blunder when "Conjoined Cranes" was executed, a big opening would arise. It was a suitable chance for Kirin.

She sneaked around the huge hammer which was swung downward to the side while eluding so that her katana did not break. Position-like, it was difficult to aim at the school badge on the chest, but there was no doubt that it was a decisive way to prevail.

"Got you!"

Kirin swung Senbakiri downward with a loud scream.

"Fufu! Way to go, come as much as you want!"

"Wha—!?"

However, Ardi, far from dodging that blow, pushed out (shove) his head himself to block it. The sensation of cutting at a hard metal was transmitted to Kirin through Senbakiri. It was a moderate response, but Ardi, without flinching, shook off Kirin with his arm which was like a big tree.

Kirin could not help taking distance, too, and set up Senbakiri again.

Needless to say that the head was one of the vital points of a human, and a place which one would try to protect even unconsciously. To dare to use that place as a shield was—

"...You were really careless."

Though Ayato escaped from "Conjoined Cranes" by also receiving one attack of Kirin before, it was of a means different from that. It was precisely because he was an existence fundamentally different from a human that it could work.

"Fuhahahaha! Certainly if it was a human's body, the outcome would have been decided by now! But unfortunately, my body is a machine! Even the head is not more than one of the parts! It seem that you forgot that point!"

"..."

Since it was actually true, Kirin could not reprove it.

While she herself pointed out his flaw as a machine, she had moved by a fundamental point in accordance with the usual common sense.

"I still have a long way to go, too..."

As Kirin admonished herself so, she immediately changed her awareness.

The match had just begun.

"Now then, I should also express my gratitude for providing me with good data."

While saying so, Ardi slowly stroked his head so as to check the scar.

To the part which would correspond to — his right eye, a straight sword cut was chopped.

"Your gratitude...?"

As Kirin quizzically asked again, Ardi proudly bent his chest and declared this.

"Fufufu...! All right, Rimsi. Now is the time we show that!"

- ψ -

"—I refuse."

But, Rimsi who was facing Saya and was in the air flatly declined without even turning towards Ardi who cried loudly.

"...Why?"

Ardi asked in a somewhat downhearted tone.

"I returned you those words, you damn low brain. Why is there a need to do such a thing in this situation now? In the first place, it's up to me to decide such things, not you."

Although saying so, Rimsi did remove her gaze from Saya.

While fixing her breathing which was disturbed, Saya lightly laughed.

"...Still reluctant this far in the match?"

"It's a strategy to the bitter end. —I'm already fighting you seriously, but are you still dissatisfied?"

"...No way."

As Saya said so, energy shrank on Ruinsharif — Rimsi's left hand.

"Then, it's good."

With the launching sound similar to a monster's roar, a whirlpool of huge light attacked as it seemed to completely swallow Saya. Saya's Waldenholt was still in the process of forced cooling, so a counterattack was impossible.

As Saya evaded it by rolling over, the ground where she was standing just before exploded and vanished without leaving any trace. Needless to say that even a Starpulse Generation could not get unscathed if hit directly by that.

In addition, to the place where she rolled over, light bullets downpoured from the gun which Rimsi mercilessly set up in her right hand. Saya moved in zigzag and evaded it while using Waldenholt's barrel as shield.

(...I understand, but if this drags on, the disadvantageous one will be me)

If she was to compare Waldenholt and Ruinsharif in terms of simple ability, she completely lost in the quick firing, but was slightly above regarding the accuracy; however this was probably the difference of correction ability which came purely from combat experience. Actually, Rimsi was gradually correcting (adjusting) it.

They were almost equal about power — However, Waldenholt had not yet revealed his maximum output. It was probably the same also for Ruinsharif.

"What's wrong? You're just been running away for some time now."

Energy once again gathered in Rimsi's left arm.

Ruinsharif's quick fire efficiency was about three times that of Waldenholt. In other words, while Saya could attack only once, Rimsi could attack three times. Although the diversity of attacks had been improved since Waldenholt also had a right and a left gun barrels, because it was a Lobos transition system, one could not just deny that time for cooling was necessary no matter what. Moreover, since heat piled up the more it was used, the time also became longer, little by little.

But still, Saya did not think that this Lux made by her father was inferior to that of Camilla Pareto. If it was not this, a destructive power of a crushing blow which could not be achieved. That essence was packed here.

"...Therefore, I will demonstrate it."

As Saya confirmed that Waldenholt returned to a standby state, she fixed its body by injecting multiple anchors (in the ground).

"Why are you trying to do? You can't take an evasive action like that, you know?"

"There's no need to dodge."

"Hou?"

Rimsi's eyes abruptly tapered at these words.

"I see. The output pattern is different from what you used until now. So, I assume it's your hidden card."

"..."

Saya, remaining silent, overlapped the right and left barrels.

The gearing sound of two metals could be heard and the two circuits were connected. This was Waldenholt's original form.

"Fufu... I think that it's rather nonsense, but — all right. I will ride on that. Let's once again go with a contest of strength."

When Rimsi said so, she slowly got down on the ground. It was probably in order to also invest the flight unit's energy to the left arm.

"Ruinsharif — Maximum output."

"..."

Tremendous energy was accumulated in both muzzles.

Sparks like small lightning flitted about in Saya's surroundings, and the air vibrated as if the surrounding space creaked.

If she was to miss the Prana control even a little, Waldenholt would accidentally discharged immediately, and Saya would not come out of it unscathed.

The energy gathered increased to the limit before long, and that moment where it was on the verge of bursting.

"Discharge!"

"Kaboom...!"

The torrent of light which swirled from Rimsi's left arm and the extremely compressed heavy light bullet from Saya's Waldenholt were shot. Saya's expression was distorted at the recoil at the time of discharge.

Both clashed at a halfway point like a while ago and it looked like they rivaled for a moment, but—

"Wha...!?"

The light bullet of Waldenholt easily overpowered the torrent of light and scattered it.

Rimsi promptly tried to dodge it, but it was slightly late.

"—!"

The next moment, Rimsi's body was swallowed by a huge dome-shaped light.

After the silence of a moment, a great explosion arose as if blowing off the hall itself, all the protective walls surrounding the stage rattlingly shook to the tremor from the raging blast, as if they were about to break, and screams rose from here and there in the stands.

When the blast settled down before long, Rimsi was on her knees in the center of the explosion greatly scooped out like a crater. Her left arm was completely destroyed and spouted sparks and black smoke. Like that, it was probably no longer possible to use Ruinsharif.

(That said... It's strange there is no great damage other than that.)

Even if she avoided a direct hit, there was too little damage considering that she was caught up in such a great explosion.

As Saya who thought it to be suspicious looked closely, a wall of thin light was flickering as it protected half of Rimsi's body.

"That is..."

"Fuhahahaha! It was a hair's breadth, eh, Rimsi!"

A lively laughter suddenly echoed there.

When looking, Ardi who stood on the edge of the crater was slightly happily looking down at Rimsi.

"As expected, I could completely defend against it, but we do not have the luxury to say."

"...I understand."

On the other hand, Rimsi's voice seemed to be really mortifying.

"...I see. That defensive barrier, you can deploy it anywhere else beside around you, huh."

It was beyond her expectations, but in that case, it was comprehensible.

The defensive wall which Ardi usually deployed looked thin probably because he was far away from her.

"I-I'm sorry, Saya-san. I couldn't hold him down."

Kirin who was running up bowed her head with an apologetic face.

"No. You have really done well against that big opponent. It's enough."

As Saya stroked Kirin's head which was lowered, she gently thanked her.

"Even if I couldn't defeat her, I was able to make one almost powerless. In other words, it's now a two-to-one fight. Our superiority is..."

"I wonder about it."

Rimsi who stood up unsteady on her feet interrupted such words of Saya.

"...Hmm?"

"I will admit that you certainly surpassed me. However, it doesn't mean that you surpassed "us"."

As Rimsi said so, she slowly looked up at Ardi.

"Ardi, since it has come to this, there's not helping it. I don't want to do it, but we shall do just as you requested."

"Fufu, it should be like this! I am ready to go whenever you want!"

As Rimsi breathed a small sigh, she greatly extended both her hands. At the same time, the light of Mana Dite began to overflow from her body.

"ACM unit, first external armor, various Luxes purge... Limit control transfer."

Then, Rimsi's flight unit and armor plate parted from her body as they floated, and multiple huge guns type Lux manifested and danced in the air.

"Oh yes! It's there, it's there, it's there, it's there! Connected start!"

And when they went towards Ardi as if being guided, they adjusted his position by shining type beacon—

『O-Oooh! D-D-Don't tell me t-this is—!?』

While the voice of the live reporter, who got excited resounded, smoke like steam blew up from Ardi's body and his shoulders greatly opened as they cracked. The flight unit divided into two, the docking — the Lux and armor plate to those apertures overlapped as they clung (stuck) to both hands and both feet.

His pair of eyes strongly shone and a green light which overflowed from his whole body changed to blue.

This was without a doubt—

"F...Fusion?"

To the dumbfounded Saya and Kirin, Ardi proudly declared.

"Fuhahahaha! This is my (our) true appearance!"



—The same time, the private booth seat of Allekant Academy Student Council.

"Oh my! To think that they would be cornered to the point that they have to use that. It's slightly unexpected."

"...Will it be really all right?"

At Ernesta sitting cross-legged on the chair, Camilla who was sitting beside her asked with a severe countenance.

In the deserted booth, there were only Camilla and Ernesta.

"There was no problem during the simulation, so it should be all right."

"I hope so, but... Even now, I regret for not having let you pack that (thing)."

"Fufufu, even if you said that now, it became like that because Camilla's Ruinsharif lost in a contest of power, right?"

"Th-That is..."

With an embarrassing face, Camilla turned her gaze away.

"Well, I think it can't be helped; since only the power of a Lux from 'that' Professor Sasamiya was really unexpected."

"...I will admit that it was certainly an unexpected performance."

"Then, it can't also be helped if they use that to win! Right? Right?"

"Well..."

To Ernesta which was letting her pupils glitter extremely joyfully, Camilla greatly sighed.

"I don't understand... It's hard to say that the situation is by no means bright. And yet why are you so glad?"

"Ehehehehehe."

With a face which loosened, Ernesta looked at Camilla.

"After all, those children, they are growing up at an amazing speed. No, they completely exceed my expectations; it's too amazing."

And while flapping her feet, she continued happily.

"In addition, if they succeeded in controlling that, I wonder what will really happen."

- ψ -

The fact that large parts attached to and increased Ardi's shoulders, made Ardi look much sterner and more dignified than before. Large caliber Luxes in both his hands and also things which looked like gun type Luxes on both his legs added; it was exactly a full armament aspect.

"Now, how is it? This appearance which increase my magnificence and deepened my dignified presence!"

Ardi stuck out his chest really proudly.

"Hmm... It's really cool!"

"Eh...?"

With a surprised face, Kirin turned towards Saya who muttered so.

"Fuhahahahahaha! Now, come at me wherever you want!"

Ardi lightly brandished the hammer which he held in his hand and thrust its ferrule on the ground. And with just that, the earth was gouged and it caved in.

"It doesn't just look like merely parts only increased, eh."

"..."

As Saya lightly nodded at Kirin's words, she quickly checked Waldenholt's condition. Because she shot in full burst, it will take more time for cooling. She might change it to a different weapon, but if she was to break that defensive wall, no other weapon than Waldenholt would probably work.

"Hmm... If you don't come, then allow me the first move."

They wanted to earn a little more time if possible, but it did not seem that they could do so.

Seeing Ardi setting up his hammer, Saya braced herself. When she turned a fleeting glance at Rimsi, it did not look like she was going to participate in the battle as she was completely unarmed.

(Then, to make the best use of our numerical superiority, first...)

The next moment when Saya thought up to there.

"—Wha—!?"

Suddenly, a black large build appeared in front of her like a wall.

(Fast...!)

"Saya-san!"

The Hammer swung down was hardly in a timing which she could evade, but she was saved by Kirin who jumped in and carried her. As the two girls took distance and rebuilt their stance, they greatly spitted out a breath together.

"...Sorry Kirin, you saved me."

"It's nothing. More importantly that movement... it's completely different from until a while ago."

While cautiously setting up Senbakiri, Kirin continued quizzically.

"However, from what I saw, it isn't as if his swordsmanship has changed. Or perhaps should I say simply his speed and his power are now in a completely different league..."

Saya was taken aback by these words and looked at Ardi.

The parts which were added to his shoulders should have been those of the flight unit. If he used them as propulsive power, then it explained the increase in speed; but it did not seem to be just that. Assuming that basic specs were improved more...

"Kirin. It's just a guess, but I somehow understood the root^[4]."

"The root?"

"Those parts are powered by the multiple Mana Dites standing side by side and which are controlled. I think that Rimsi handed out some of her Mana Dites to that big thing."

"Ah..."

If it was the case, then she also understood that only basic specs such as speed and power were enhanced.

"If so — then, that big thing should have some defects now."

"Defects?"

"If that big thing can endure it without trouble, then such a troublesome system won't be especially necessary. It would have been convenient for them if he had used such equipments and specs from the start. Since he didn't do so, then it means that it's somehow incomplete... Is what I think."

"I see. No wonder."

She came up with such a guess at the very beginning because it was a case like that of Ayato where there was a time limit. If they had forcibly drawn an output beyond the original durability (stamina), he would not have held to that degree for a long time.

Or by being in this state, there was a possibility that some risk occurred. This could also consider various cases; for example there would be a burden on the processing system due to the high output, or there were also common stories where it would end up downing.

"...In any case, there is too little information as it stands. Kirin, can you gain time even a little?"

"Understood. I will try."

As Kirin nodded, she took Senbakiri in side posture and fixed her breathing.

"Fufu, it looks like you are over with the strategy meeting. As expected, so you make the first move, Toudou Kirin."

While glaring at Ardi who casually shortened the distance, Kirin gradually reduced the interval—

"Haaah!"

The moment when Ardi stepped in her range, she slashed at him with a jump.

Ardi blocked the reverse blow with his hammer, but the cutting edge which jumped up immediately connected to the next slash.

It was "Conjoined Cranes".

Although Ardi's speed seemed to have certainly increased and he could react to all those attacks, even so he was not able to escape from "Conjoined Cranes".

"Hmm, as expected it is a wonderful skill, Toudou Kirin...! Even for the current me, it is impossible to deal with these sword skills, huh."

While handling well Kirin's Senbakiri, Ardi laughed.

"But however—!"

At the same time with Ardi's shout, blue light gushed all over his body and the wind welled up.

Kirin continued her attacks without minding it, but the hammer which blocked her overhead chop sent Kirin's body flying.

"—!"

Though unbelievable, he removed "Conjoined Cranes" with brute force.

Even if Kirin was still a 13 years old young girl, she was a Starpulse Generation who accumulated strict training, and she also possessed something which far surpassed physical strength. Her driving was heavy, and in case of average Starpulse Generation, even if he possessed great power, defending against it would be the best he could do.

If it was someone with excellent sword skill like Ayato, he might be able to flip her katana to some extent, but sending her body flying was not common. First of all, it would be impossible for a human.

"Fuhahahaha! Not yet!"

In addition; Ardi began to pursue Kirin, who was sent flying.

Although Kirin tried to ward it off with Senbakiri, her stance was bad as she just landed and she could not parry it.

"Guh—!"

She was once again sent flying by the hammer swung from right beside, and her body was violently thrown at the defense wall^[5].

"Kirin!"

When Saya tried to help her as she hurriedly rushed over, Kirin, even though bleeding from the edge of her mouth, stopped it.

"I-I'm all right... More importantly...!"

When she returned her look to Ardi with these words, a black large build pointed the tip of the hammer towards them while setting up the hammer like a gun.

As they confirmed that a huge amount of energy was gathering there, they shivered.

(No way, a shooting weapon!)

"You are powerful enemies who should be respected. I got various teachings from you. Therefore, I shall carry out the first teaching and crush you with all my power."

"...That's kind of bad. Kirin, can you move?"

"Y-Yes—!"

However, Kirin who started to stand grimaced.

"Kirin... Your leg...?"

"I-I'm all right...!"

Though Kirin firmly insisted, her right leg was obviously swollen. It did not seem to be broken, but it would be difficult for her to evade that attack under such a condition.

"..."

Saya immediately made up her mind and linked Waldenholt once again.

The cooling was not yet completed, but now was not a situation to grumble about such a trivial thing.

"Kirin, to my back."

"B-But, like that..."

"It's fine."

Since there was not time for dialogue, she broke off the conversation like that, and poured prana into Waldenholt. Immediately, the Mana Dite induced an Over-Excitation Total Response Phenomenon, and energy rose, but — probably because the cooling was insufficient, the response was slower than usual.

(I won't make it in time like this...!)

The moment she thought so, Ardi's hammer spouted fire.

"Walneil Hammer, fire!"

"Kuh... !"

She could not help but pull the trigger in an insufficient condition.

The head of the huge hammer, which was shot by Ardi, approached the two girls while rotating in high speed, but Waldenholt's light bullet stopped it at the very limit.

"Guh...!"

Since there was no time to set out (hammer out) the anchors, they desperately put up with the recoil with their bodies which were almost overturned. The light bullet and the hammer were jostling as is while intensely scattering something like sparkles, but the light bullet exploded before long as it used up all its energy and the two girls were thoroughly pushed back up against the defense wall by the blast.

Even so, since they were able to defend against that shot just now, it should be said that it was quite satisfactory.

The hammer head which was shot, returned to Ardi's hand as it was forced back by the blast. It settled back into the part of the handle, which was raised overhead, as before.

"Hmm... I did not think that you would be able to pull through this. I ought to say as one would expect."

"..."

Saya who, though tottering, stood up, lightly glared at Ardi who said as he was impressed.

"...Kirin, can you move?"

"Of course."

Kirin who stood up behind Saya set up Senbakiri so as to respond to it.

Though her voice was still filled of enough power, the damages she took were hardly small. Especially for a fencer using speed as a weapon, like Kirin, an injury on the leg should influence her mobility quite greatly.

Saya's Waldenholt was also short-circuited here and there, and as expected she could no longer use it.

—Even so.

As Saya strongly bit her lips, she greatly opened her eyes wide after closing them once.

"...I can't afford to give up."

She returned Waldenholt to the activation body state, and active another Lux.

Type 39 – Gleaming Form Laser Canon Wolfdora. In terms of power, what came after Waldenholt was this. She did not know how far it would work, but she could do nothing but try.

"I count on you for the support."

With movements as not to let one feel that she was hurt in the leg, Kirin also stepped before Saya.

"...It's really mysterious. If it was the me of before this match began, I would have concluded that that action of yours is just a useless struggle. However, the current me feels even respect towards you."

As Ardi said so in an unusually calm tone, blue light once again spouted from his whole body.

As if it was the signal, Kirin and Saya are parted left and right, and began to run.

—And shortly thereafter, the first semifinal match lowered the curtains.

Chapter 2 – Unscrupulous Winding Thread

"Saya! Kirin-chan!"

When Ayato rushed to the waiting room, the two girls were sitting on the sofa completely exhausted. There were bandages wound all over their bodies and it was really painful to look at, but fortunately it seemed that they were not greatly injured.

"Geez, are you all right? You have put on quite the performance."

Julis, who also entered from behind Ayato, looked worried contrary to her way of talking.

"...No problem. Rather, if our school badges did not break, we would have still been able to keep fighting." Turning only her face towards them, Saya said with a sour look.

But, for Ayato who had watched the match, he knew that she was just pretending to be all right. After against Ardi who performed a fusion, one might say that it was almost a one-sided development. Of course, Saya and Kirin might have also won, but in a situation where Kirin got injured and Saya's Waldenholt was no longer usable, the match might have been as good as decided. Although Saya and Kirin desperately put up a hard fight afterwards, they were held down before Ardi's overwhelming power.

That said, Saya's point was true in a sense, too.

No matter how they were beaten up, they stood up for themselves by never giving up, and if their school badges didn't break, they would have definitely kept fighting until their bodies fell apart.

"Haah... I would never have imagined that "Conjoined Cranes" would be stopped in that way..."

Kirin who floated a powerless smile said in a tone blurring frustration.

"I'm also sorry for showing such a cowardly appearance to you, Senpai. Like this, I won't even be able to face Flora-chan who cheered on us..."

It looked like Flora, who should have been cheering them on from the general stands, hadn't shown up yet.

"I don't think that you're cowardly. At least, I don't think that there is someone who could stop "Conjoined Cranes" in the same way as that."

Ayato, as someone who had personally experienced Kirin's "Conjoined Cranes" with his own body, could assert at least that. Added to the fact that Kirin's slashes were heavy, when executing "Conjoined Cranes", even in posture, the person on the receiving end would be driven off into a situation where enduring it would be the utmost he could do. And if one was to repel Kirin's body from that posture, Ayato could not even imagine just how much physical power he would need.

"I never realized my own immaturity as this time. In the end, I'm probably relying too much on "Conjoined Cranes". I have to review my basics more..."

As Kirin told so as to persuade herself, she strongly grasped her fist.

Ayato strongly swallowed words of comfort, which almost spilled out unintentionally. Carelessly comforting the loser might end up driving him into a corner later on.

"Anyway, you should properly take care of yourselves now. There was no problem with the medical check, right?"

In the Festa, a medical check was imposed upon the loser (it was optional for the winner). When it came to a serious injury, they might also be hospitalized to a medical house; but since the Starpulse Generation originally had a high recuperative power, most of the emergency measures would be managed on the site.

"Yes, there was no problem in particular. If I must say, my right foot is a little..."

"Oh... does it hurt very much?"

"Ah. No, the medicine is effective now after all... Thank you." While saying that, Kirin waved her hands a little as to say that she was all right.

It was very admirable of her.

"What about you, Saya?"

"...It aches all over my body. But, more than that... it's more painful to have made a waste of (to have ruined several of) my Luxes."

It was indeed an answer typical of Saya.

"Well, since we will take revenge for you in the final, you can rest in peace. Right, Ayato?"

At Julis' words, Ayato answered; "Oh well, I would really like, but... After being shown that semifinal, I can't promise.", with a serious face.

Actually, in terms of sword skills, Kirin was above Ayato. To defeat an opponent who overwhelmed Kirin would not be an easy task. That, even though Ayato possessed an ogre Lux.

"...It's promising, Riessfeld."

Then, Saya, who was lying down, raised her body and said slightly amazed. "To think that you can say such words after having watched our match. Either you're really an idiot or you have some prospects of success..."

"There is no way that there would be such a thing with such a monster as an opponent." Julis answered flatly.

"...Then, are you inevitably a real idiot?"

"Then, very well. From the beginning, my goal is the grand slam. Who else would speak of such dreamlike story if it's not an idiot?"

At these words, Saya opened wide her eyes as she was surprised for an instant, and then floated a wry smile.

"... You're absolutely right. Then, you can't afford to stumble in the first Festa."

"Well, then, it's just like that." Julis said, and held out her fist.

Saya also bumped (hit) her fist on Julis's. "...I leave it to you."



"Yeah, count on us."

Ayato who was looking at the two girls with a side glance chuckled — and then immediately tightened his face.

In the semifinal, Ardi's strength after the fusion was certainly exceptional.

But, it was too strong.

He wondered whether he got that strong by only combining some parts.

(That feeling, I have sensed it somewhere...)

While Ayato brooded over his thoughts, he turned his look towards the entrance.

In the press conference room which was ahead, the winner interview of the two from Allekant should be in progress right now.

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"Haah, Really, if those guys of mass media are persistent, there will be no end. Even though we must quickly go back and repair Ardi and Rimsi."

"..."

While walking down the passage returning to the waiting room as if dancing, Ernesta grumbled.

Though she complained, her face was smiling; but Camilla, who was walking beside her, contrasted it.

With a sullen face, she sank into silence and advanced at a quickened pace.

She was like that the whole time since from the Interview in the press conference room. If the winner had acted like this, the mass media would probably have looked puzzled as well.

"Hey, hey, Camilla. You should cheer up already. It can't be helped. If we didn't use that, we might have lost after all."

"..."

Ernesta took one step forward and turned back to look at Camilla's face.

Even so, Camilla did not loosen her pace and passed Ernesta as she ignored her.

When Ernesta deeply breathed a big sigh, she erased the smile on her face. "—Even you, Camilla. You knew since the beginning, right?"

Then, Camilla finally stopped walking.

It was a somewhat sly expression, but it could not be helped.

"What you and I are aiming is different. It's the same until midway, but we will eventually have to part somewhere. You agreed to help me after understanding that, right?"

"That is—!"

Camilla who looked back opened her mouth as she wanted to say something... and then shut it.

Ernesta, who saw it, sighed once again.

She was thankful for the kindness of this friend of hers, but she thought that it was time she should make things clear.

"Camilla's final goal is 'ultimate versatility'. In other words... a weapon which can be managed by anybody, right?"

"...Yes, it is."

At Ernesta's words, Camilla nodded after a short pause.

"But, such a weapon doesn't exist wherever you search in this world. It's obvious, isn't it? After all, if you thoroughly investigate, you will find that any weapon depends on the human who uses it."

Then, what to do?

It was simple. One should just make another being, different from a human, use it.

It was the puppets.

If it was the puppets, they would be able to use any kind of complex weapons. The humans only had to merely order them.

"But in that case, ego isn't needed in puppets. No, rather they shouldn't have. I mean, if they have, they would become the same as humans."

However, Ernesta's goal was different.

Ernesta's wish was to create an existence equal to humans with her own hands. Autonomous puppets which could cry, laugh, know joy and grow up^[6].

That was why she felt deeply moved enough to shiver at the growth which Ardi showed in this semifinal. This was exactly what she had sought.

And one day, they would definitely obtain the same privileges as humans, but that was Ernesta's final goal.

Then, Camilla floated a wry smile and turned slightly nostalgic eyes towards Ernesta. "...Do you remember about when you and I met for the first time?"

"Of course. After all, at that time, half of Camilla's body was blown off. There's no way that I would ever forget since the impact was that strong." Ernesta said and cacklingly laughed.

Camilla was attacked by a group of the anti-government organization when she visited a conflict area in attendance at her parents work at the time. Although Camilla and her parents had also employed several guards, they were outnumbered. Camilla's parents lost their lives, and Camilla herself suffered an injury so serious that it was life-threatening. On that occasion, she was accommodated by a laboratory of Frauenlob with which her parents had business.

Ernesta, who was called an extraordinary genius since that time, was by chance performing puppet research in that lab. Although regeneration technology was widespread, it inevitably took time for nurture (culture) and thus not applicable in case of an emergency. There, Ernesta applied her own techniques and saved Camilla's life.

Though she did not tell her directly, Ernesta thought that, from that time on, Camilla was fixated on the idea of creating a weapon which could be handled by anyone. When Camilla's parents were attacked by the anti-government organization, they tried to defend themselves with the weapons the guards were in possession of, but they were not able to use them competently.

That said, Camilla's parents were fairly ordinary civilians, and even if they could use the the weapons effectively they would have probably been no match people from the anti-government organization who had recieved

combat training. In the end, a weapon was something which changed depending on the human using it. No matter how much one inquired into a weapon's versatility, that would not change.

That was why Camilla believed the existence called puppets to be one answer.

Camilla did not trust the creature called human more than anyone else in this world.

"Right. Half of my body is a puppet you have created. Therefore, I swore that I would give you half of my life."

"Yeah, I received it, I received it."

Ernesta nodded quite indifferently.

"Therefore... I do not mean to complain about your dream. It is certainly different from my goal, but it is another issue again."

"Then, why are you so angry?"

Camilla raised her eyes at these words.

"It is purely anger as an engineer! I should have said it many times! That it is too dangerous to use it in actual combat! And that fear was well founded! Look, at how abnormally these values are increasing!"

As Camilla said so and tapped her portable terminal, a space window opened and many graphs were displayed.

"Can such output be controlled? Wasn't it one step short of rampaging?"

"Boo, even if you say that, it can't be helped. If we had lost here, we would've lost everything."

Ernesta sulked like a child who was scolded.

"If it is just showing results, it is already enough..."

"No, no, I have said it from the beginning. My goal is the championship. And after that, the first thing I will do is arrange for Ardi and Rimsi to officially become students at our Academy."

Ernesta, not being able to contain her excitement, began to dance round and round.

Right. And it will just be the beginning to make the public recognize the autonomous type puppets.

For that purpose, I can't yield the championship of this Phoenix.

"But even so...!" Camilla said up to there, she then received a call on the portable terminal in her hand.

"...It's me. Yes, so... What?"

The tone of her voice changed in the middle of her reply.

As Ernesta thought "what's up?", Camilla looked at her quizzically,

"It seems that you have received a communication. —From Dirk Eberwein."

"He~e... What a surprise. Yes, it's fine. Let me have it."

"...Understood."

Camilla operated her terminal and a new space window unfolded; a plump young man was projected there.

『...Yo, are you my friend Ernesta Kühne?』

"Hahaha. To think you would call and say that to someone you meet for the first time 'you'^[7], as expected. Yes, that's right. I'm the Sculptor Faction(Pygmalion) representative, Ernesta Kühne. Nice to meet you, <Tyrant>"

Ernesta light bowed with her tone which was not different than usual.

『Hmm, a playful woman, as the rumors say.』

"Likewise, you're a more detestable man than the rumors say. So, what business do you have with me? Weren't you guys doing well with the Great Professor(Magnus Opus)?"

At these words, Dirk's pupils eerily shone for an instant.

『You seem to be more informed than I thought. But, let me correct you. We just came to an agreement of mutual non-interference with that crazy woman. It isn't as if we're friends or something.』

"Hmm... I didn't know that. But well, it's obvious if you carefully think about it, huh. There's no way that the Great Professor(Magnus Opus) would ever

forgive you, who snatched the Venomous Witch(Ereshkigal) from her side~."

『...Such a thing doesn't matter. Listen, this is the main issue. —Join hands with us.』

"Hmm, I was wondering what you would say; and you spit such nonsense...!"

Though Camilla also glared at Dirk with disgust, the redhead young man said with a serious face.

"Mmm, isn't it a little impolite for a demand of friendship? In the first place, I almost know nothing about you guys, so don't you agree that such thing should be started after first knowing each other properly?"

『There is no need to go that far. I said to join hands, but it would be good if you could just cooperate with us, using our methods, when required. I will return you a favor accordingly afterward.』

"A favor?"

To Ernesta who asked back, Dirk snorted with displeasure.

『Just in case, so that negotiations can proceed logically, I prepare a present easy to understand. You can decide after seeing that.』

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"Excuse me!"

A graceful voice along with the sound of a knock resounded on the other side of the door, and Claudia entered the waiting room.

"Sasamiya-san, Toudou-san, it was regrettable this last match. But, being in the top four is a result you should be proud of. For Seidokan Academy, the prospect of the season has become quite brighter now. For that reason, I will prepare a reward appropriate for the two of you."

"N-No, you need not...!"

"...you don't need to that; we only did that for ourselves."

To Claudia who politely bowed her head, Saya and Kirin answered somewhat embarrassed.

Players who won a high rank in the Festa, though not as much as the victor, were considerably rewarded. It seemed to be either purely a monetary award or something near to the treatment given to the Top Twelve; but when thinking they had nothing to lose even if they lost in a duel, it might be something amazing.

"By the way, Claudia. Didn't you see Flora on the way?"

"No... Unfortunately, I did not see her."

At Julis' question, Claudia slowly shook her head.

"We have promised to meet in the waiting room of Sasamiya and Kirin after the match..."

Quite a long time had already passed since the match was over. Even though there was still enough time because Ayato's and Julis' match was in the evening, as expected it was slightly worrying that she was late like this.

"Can't you get to contact her through her portable terminal?"

"I'm already been trying, since a little while now, but..."

Ayato stood up and called out to Julis who seemed to be anxious. "Instead, we should go look to our waiting room once again. Flora-chan might have misunderstood and gone to the wrong place."

"You're right... I will also ask to the reception whether they have given shelter a lost child."

At the time Julis said so and was about to leave the room, her portable terminal received a call as if waiting for it.

"It's from Flora. Geez, what on earth is she doing...?"

Though Julis who confirmed the call, while the others in the room floated a smile, her expression immediately became serious.

"A voice communication...?"

As she opened the space window while suspiciously frowning, what was heard from the pitch black window was a low, dark (gloomy) voice.

『...You are Julis-Alexia Van Riessfeld, right?』

"Who are you, you bastard? Why do you have that portable terminal?"

Though anger and impatience floated on Julis' face, and she asked in a loud voice, the other party indifferently continued without answering the question.

『I held on to the owner of this portable terminal. Is Amagiri Ayato there?』

"Yeah, I am, but... Is Flora-chan safe?"

Although surprised at the sudden nomination, Ayato first checked the important thing above all.

Then, after a short silence—

『...Princess! Amagiri-sama! F-Flora is all right!』

A child's voice which trembled a little called the two people.

No doubt about it. It was Flora's voice.

『If you accept our demand, I will also guarantee her safety afterwards.』

"...What do you demand?"

『To apply for an urgent freeze processing to Ser-Versta. As soon as the acceptance is confirmed, she will be released.』

"Urgent freeze processing ...?"

『When it is judged that the demand was not executed, and when communication to the Hunter Guards or Seidokan Academy's secret service is confirmed, I will not be able to guarantee her safety. In addition, it will be also so even in the case you are to withdraw from the Festa. This is all.』

"Ah, w-wait—!"

When one-sidedly saying only that, the space window immediately disappeared.

As Ayato hurriedly borrowed the portable terminal from Julis' hand, he called back again.

But, of course there was no response. Either they turned the power off or they might have destroyed it so as not to be traced.

"Flora, was kidnapped... you said...?"

Julis muttered with a pale face. There was no power in her voice, and it did not seem like Julis' voice at all.

—And.

"Please, calm down, Julis. The other party's aim isn't you, but Ayato. It will do nothing if you lose your cool. That's exactly what they want."

"Claudia..."

"We shall first properly grasp the situation and then think about what we should do."

As Julis took a deep breath at these words, she slapped both her cheeks.

"...Yeah, you're right. Sorry."

A strong anger still swelled in her eyes, but it looked like she was no longer upset.

As expected of Claudia, she was really reliable.

"Claudia, what did he mean about urgent freeze processing?"

The offender's demand was directed to Ayato.

He intended to do it even right now depending on the situation.

Whatever that was, it would not be more valuable than Flora's life.

"An urgent freeze processing, is something applied in case that a scholarship ogre Lux user felt danger in his ogre Lux."

When Claudia turned around towards Ayato, she slightly lowered eyes.

"As you already know, the ogre Lux is an existence which contains some kind of risk. And, the cases where only the user understood its danger are also not few. Hence, the ogre Lux user, by his own judgment, can make a request to forcibly seal that ogre Lux."

"In other words... The offender's demand is to prevent me from using Ser-Versta?"

"Probably."

"T-Then in that case, wouldn't it be better to only rescind the process after Flora-chan is released? It won't be like that forever, right?"

As Kirin nervously said so, Claudia shrugged her shoulders with an expression which neither agreed nor disagreed.

"Certainly, if it is just the processing, there will be no problem. In the first place, the urgent freeze processing is literally something done in emergency, and a detailed investigation is to be carried out after the seal. If it is judged there that there was no danger, then the freeze measures of Ser-Versta will probably be canceled as soon as possible. However—"

"In that case, Ayato may never again use Ser-Versta."

With a bitter face, Julis took over Claudia's words.

"Eh? But..."

To Kirin who looked puzzled wonderingly, Ayato took out Ser-Versta's activation body.

"It means that if I do something like that, this guy will never forgive me, huh."

"Ah..."

As if guessing it, Kirin also cast her eyes down in vexation.

Right. There was no way that this ogre Lux which was moody under normal circumstances would remain silent after something like that being done. They did not know to which extent the circumstances around Ser-Versta's ego was grasped, but judging from the experiences so far, they could not expect leniency as they consider these circumstances. Let alone drawing out it's own power, it would probably never again let Ayato touch him/it.

"Claudia, what should be concretely done about that application?"

There was no need to hesitate if Flora would be saved with only that much. Though he felt guilty towards Ser-Versta, since one person's life was involved, it was natural to give priority to that.

"Is it really all right, Ayato?"

Claudia asked so with a somewhat painful face. Of course, losing Ser-Versta here could be considered fatal for the fight in this Phoenix. It

was probably a no-brainer for the person himself, but Claudia also had her position of Seidokan Academy student council president.

"Yes, it's all right."

"I'm sorry, Ayato..."

With an expression on which vexation and regret were mixed, Julis looked downward.

"It's fine, Julis. After all, family is the most important for anyone."

When Ayato put his hand on the shoulder of such Julis, he kindly said so.

"However — There is no confirmation that Flora will really be released."

Then, Saya who kept silent until then muttered in a low voice.

Everybody was probably thinking about the same thing, but it was a thought which they could not voice out.

"But even so, if he doesn't accept the demand, Flora will be...!"

"I'm not saying that. I'm just saying that there is still another option."

"Another option...?"

"We can save Flora by ourselves. If so, then there will be no more problem."

"Wha...!?"

Julis was dumbfounded at Saya's words.

However, Claudia brooded over these words with a serious face.

"I see... It is one idea."

"In his demand, the offender mentioned not to tell to the Hunter Guards and the secret service, but he did not say anything other than that. Then, we can also take that as OK if we are to freely look for her and save her."

"T-There is no way the offender will understand such logic..."

"No, it is not something to take so lightly. Setting aside whether or not it is OK, it is good as long as the offender does not find out."

As Claudia said so, she looked around at the faces of the people present.

"I came up with one compromise plan. Of course, it is up to you whether or not you will ride on this, Julis..."

The gaze of such Claudia turned and stopped at Julis.

"...Understood. Let's hear it for now."

"Then, first let's pretend that I was not in here. I did not hear anything. Moreover, I will hide for a little while. I will think about an excuse later, but I will not accept a call from anyone."

"Ha?"

Claudia continued her explanation disregarding all of them which became dumbfounded.

"And Ayato, you will give an application for the urgent freeze processing. Since the acceptance permission of the student council president, that's me, is needed on that application, I can gain time until I come back, right?"

"I see, since the application itself was applied, it would be assumed that he accepts the demand..."

Since the non-acceptance would become the problem of the student council, the offender would not be able to complain.

"Meanwhile, you will somehow manage to locate the offender's whereabouts and rescue Flora. That said, since I can't also afford to be absent to the award ceremony of the Festa, even if I can gain time, until tomorrow's closing ceremony is the limit. Deliberations are not necessary for the urgent freeze processing, so as soon as the closing ceremony ends, please think that the application is accepted."

Awards ceremony and closing ceremony were to be held after the final. Since the final was at noon, even if it dragged on too much, the remaining time would be—

"Roughly around 24 hours, huh."

"As expected, it will be impossible..."

Asterisk was small, yet unexpectedly wide.

If they were to pinpoint the offender's whereabouts in only 24 hours, unless they borrowed the Hunter Guards' power, it would be definitely impossible.

"Of course not. I guess that it will be difficult if you search in the whole of Asterisk, but I can narrow down the search area this time. Julis, I think you also know what I am talking about, right?"

"! The redevelopment area, huh!"

With a startled face, Julis looked at Claudia.

"W-What do you mean?"

"There is only one person who can calmly come up with something that foolish. Besides, the aim is Ayato and Ser-Versta. Considering that, there is no doubt at all that the mastermind is Dirk Eberwein. I don't know the reason, but he seemed to have marked Ayato and Ser-Versta at some point."

"The Tyrant..."

Kirin also seemed to know that name.

"Of course, he cannot leave evidence that he is directly involved, so going after anything along those lines would be useless. However, if he is doing it, the ones moving (doing the dirty work) are most likely Le Wolfe's Intelligence work organization — the Black Cat Institute(Grimalkin). In that case, the redevelopment area, which is their territory, should be the most likely. Above all, even if shenanigans occur, the only place where it is not conspicuous is over there."

As Claudia said up to there, she concisely summarized the main point.

"In other words — while feigning to accept the other party's demand, we have to find out the offender and rescue Flora within 24 hours from now. This is my compromise plan. How is it?"

"..."

After keeping silent for a while, Julis turned reliant eyes to Ayato.

"Ayato, what do you think?"

"I... I think the plan isn't bad. I don't mind parting with Ser-Versta, but as Saya said, there is certainly no guarantee that Flora-chan will be released with that. In that case, it would be better to do all that we can do."

"I see..."

Julis once again fell into silence, closed her eyes in order to settle her heart... and then opened them.

"—Understood. Let's go with that plan."

To these words, everyone nodded strongly.

"But... for the time being, Ayato and Riessfeld should prepare for the next semifinal."

"You're right. Since there was the condition not to withdraw from the Festa in their demand, we should first concentrate on that."

"Even if you said that we should concentrate, do you think we will be able to do it in this situation?"

A color of dissatisfaction was vividly floating on Julis' face.

"Actually, I want to abandon the Festa and go looking for Flora as soon as possible."

"Ara? But, then it will be giving up on your wish, Julis."

"I don't mind. It's meaningless if it sacrifices important things which I should protect."

Though Julis flatly asserted, she hurriedly turned towards Ayato and cast down her eyes as embarrassed.

"Ah... um, sorry. I spoke just now on my own convenience, but... we are partners. Of course, I will respect your intention."

"Don't worry about it, Julis. After all, I feel the same."

Ayato also had the wish to look for his big sister, but there was still a next Festa. it could not be comparable.

But, looking at Ayato and Julis in such a state, Claudia wryly smiled as if troubled.

"Geez, you now... If you want to realize your wish in this Asterisk, you should become a little greedier. Especially you, Julis; for some reason, you are too much afraid to lose something."

"...There's no helping it. I don't want to feel something like that ever again." Julis muttered so...

Claudia continued, like a mother who admonished her child. "We will save Flora, and also win the Phoenix. Please have spirit at least for that. It is an advice not as the student council president, but as a friend."

"Claudia..."

At these words, Julis stared at Claudia with a slightly surprised face.

"Haah... Understood. Certainly, if there's that option, there's no reason not to choose it. After all, it will be irritating to do everything the offender wants." Julis said, and nailed her fist into her palm.

It looked like she got back into her stride.

"However... why would the offender expressly say something like 'don't retire from the Festa'?"

Ayato voiced out the question he suddenly thought of.

If Dirk Eberwein's purpose was so that he did not want him to use Ser-Versta, it should not be necessary to expressly make such a demand.

"It is just a guess, but it is probably in order to confirm whether or not Ayato has accepted the demand. If you don't use Ser-Versta in the match, it will become the proof that you have complied with the demand. Since there will be a processing procedure in Seidokan whether or not the application for the urgent freeze processing was accepted, even if it is the Black Cat Institute(Grimalkin), they will take too much time to investigate it."

"I see..."

"However conversely speaking, there will be some falsified parts around there. Normally, the Equipment Department would collect the concerned ogre Lux when the application is accomplished, but... this time I will make the necessary preparations in secret, so you should just carry Ser-Versta's activation body like that under cover. —so that you will immediately be able to use when we successfully save Flora-san."

As Claudia said so, she was operating a portable terminal.

"I sent the electronic documents necessary for the urgent freeze processing application to Ayato's terminal. And also some useful data."

When Ayato checked his terminal, he had certainly received various things.

"I'm sorry, but this is as far I can help. Afterwards, please contact me only when you have saved Flora."

"No, you were a big help. Um... thank you, Claudia."

When Julis honestly expressed words of gratitude, Claudia kindly returned a smile.

"—Well then, we will go first. Time is precious."

"That's right."

Saya and Kirin made eye contact and stood up.

At such two girls, Claudia recalled something and said.

"Ah, it would be better if you could put even something like disguise when going the redevelopment area. I have heard that the Black Cat Institute(Grimalkin) selects only the elites, so they will probably not deploy surveillance here and there; but you should be extremely cautious. Well, there will no be problem if you are not found out at first glance. I think it should be enough even if you put on a hat."

"...Roger."

To the two girls who answered so and were about to leave the waiting room, this time Julis — called out to them after a moment of hesitation.

"Please wait. Honestly, it's really a relief that your helping, But you are..."

"—Julis^[8]."

Saya said, interrupting her. "It is a natural thing to lend power to a friend in trouble. So don't worry about it."

"Yes, I think the same thing." Kirin seconded.

Julis opened her eyes wide to these words of the two girls... she immediately floated a wry smile and greatly nodded.

"I see... that's right. Saya, Kirin^[9] — I leave it to you."

After a match in which they made so many efforts, their bodies should be tattered.

Nonetheless, Saya responded to it with a refreshed face.

"...Yeah, leave it to us."

Chapter 3 – The Second Semifinal Match

"Hmm....."

What first came into view was her shadow, cast by the light onto the floor.

As she absentmindedly raised her head, she noticed lamp-like lights put here and there in the dimly lit room. It seemed certain that it was indoors and was quite wide. Although both the floor and wall's building materials were exposed, it did not seem that the building was too old.

"—Don't make noise."

To that dark, cold voice which resounded from the bottom of the earth, Flora felt a shiver as if a lump of ice had been pushed against her back.

An inhuman, cold voice unlike any she had heard until now.

When she reflexively curled herself up, she noticed, for the first time, her hands and feet were bound. A gag had been forced into her mouth and she was sitting with her back leaned against the wall.

When she helplessly moved only her head raised her gaze, she noticed a tall man standing in the shadow of a pillar a short distance away.

Pitch black clothes covered his whole body as if clinging to it, and his head was also completely covered except the skin around his eyes. At first glance, he was skinny and did not seem to carry anything like a weapon, but his atmosphere was so quiet that it could be called eerie; he showed no openings.

"Behave yourself there."

After saying that, the man sank back into silence.

Even with just those words, there was a compelling and absolute sense of intimidation.

Flora could do nothing but attempt to understand the situation, even if only a little.

(Errr, if I remember correctly, when I was watching the semifinal match, I was called out to by someone...)

Although she could only recall up to there, she believed that voice was the same as this man's.

If so, did that mean this man had splendidly abducted a girl from the stands that were crammed with people?

She thought it was quite an audacious criminal act, but certainly, after carefully thinking about it, there would not be many people who would pay attention to others in all that excitement.

(Anyhow, it means... that this is a kidnapping, indeed.)

Flora was used to dealing with people who make their living through illegal means to some extent, but as expected, this was the first time she had been kidnapped. Even so, it was because of her composed personality that she could stay calm in this situation.

It was not likely for a ransom to be given for a child from a poor orphanage, so she did not think profit was the goal of the kidnapping.

If Flora herself was the target, it might be another issue. However, judging from the man's indifferent attitude, it could not be that either.

That said, she would not be chosen accidentally. After all, though still a child, Flora was of the Starpulse Generation. If anyone was alright, there would have been no need to specially choose a high risk target.

(In that case, does this have something to do with the princess after all...?)

If Flora herself was not the goal, then the only remaining possibility was a person related to her.

In other words, he would use Flora to make a demand — was the most likely of all the possibilities.

As Flora came up with that surmise, she quietly stole a glance of the man.

After coming all this way, it was illogical to be a hindrance to Julis, for whom she came to cheer on.

(I have to look for an opening and escape, or if I could somehow contact the princess...)

Immediately after Flora thought that and tried to secretly move her body—

"Ugh!?"

Flora's head was suddenly grabbed from behind and was pushed to the floor with a tremendous force.

At the same time, something cold and sharp was pressed against the nape of her neck.

"I thought that I told to behave yourself..."

The man had not moved even one step from the shadow of the pillar.

Was there any other comrade with him?

No, before that, there should have been a wall immediately behind Flora's back.

At that moment, Flora finally noticed a rhythm of Mana.

(A Dante.....!)

"—There won't be a next time."

At the moment the man said that, the thing which had held Flora down with disappeared.

Flora, still lying on the floor, breathed a sigh of relief.

Though it was frustrating, it was not an opponent whom she could possibly outwit. It looked like the only thing she could do was stay put.

At least, for now.

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『"Well, well, everyone, sorry to have kept you waiting! Finally, there are only two matches remaining in this Phoenix! Only this, the second semifinal match, and tomorrow's final are remaining! Will it be Seidokan, which has won its way up to here, that will confront Allekant for the championship, or will it be Garrardsworth?"』

While ignoring the announcement of the announcer, Yanase, who was excited, Julis walked to the center of the stage with a gloomy expression.

"...Whew, it's the match at last, huh."

"I felt, somewhat, like it was quite a long time..."

Ayato and Julis, who saw off Saya and company, returned to their waiting room and stood by. The time spent there was neared torturous as their impatience grew little by little.

"I intended to get used to the powerlessness of not being able to do anything, but... it's no use, it won't be so easy this time, either, I guess."

After saying that, Julis laughed at herself.

"Anyway, we have to believe in Saya and Kirin-chan and should concentrate on the match."

"Yeah... I understand."

As Julis slightly shook her head as if enlivening her mood, she looked towards the two people who came out from the entrance gate in the opposite side.

The two young men dressed in the uniform of St. Garrardsworth Academy — no, one of them could be said to be still a young boy. He was either the same age as Kirin or slightly older than her. His childlike innocence had not yet faded from his lovely features and fluffy blond hair.

Elliot Forster, the rank #12 of Garrardsworth. He was a young genius with the nickname of Bright Sword(Claimh Solais). Since duels were severely limited in Garrardsworth, it was said that it was difficult to climb up the ranks compared to the other academies. It was extremely exceptional that a middle school student became a Top Twelve in such an environment.

And the young man with bald head who firmly stood beside him was Doroteo Remus, also known as the Armored Magician(Brightwen). Rank #11. In contrast to Elliot, he was a stalwart veteran and his age was also over 20 years old. This should be his third Festa participation.

She looked over the match data of the two men, but as expected, when in front of them like this, she could understand their abilities quite well. Either of them alone was a fairly formidable.

"I really want to end the match quickly and go looking for Flora, but that won't be so easy if we have the True Knights of Garrardsworth as opponents. They aren't people against whom we can win while being preoccupied with another matter."

Said Julis, as she turned her gaze towards Ayato and shrugged her shoulders.

"To make matters worse, it came at a time when you can't use Ser-Versta."

"Well, I will somehow manage."

Replied Ayato, while he activated a blade type Lux.

"Hou, aren't you reliable? Then, I will leave Elliot Forster to you. I'll deal with Doroteo Remus."

"Roger."

As Ayato nodded, Julis turned towards him and said.

"—If the people who kidnapped Flora are watching, then we will show them, Fair and square, with all of our might."

"Phoenix, semifinal second match, battle start!"

After the school badges made that declaration Ayato instantly released his seal.

Up to now, it was an image of tearing off chains, but it was different now. He just had to imagine inserting a key in the lock and collect the chains together in his head. It was something like a switch. With that alone, power overflowed.

"Bloom proudly — Six-Petal Burst Firebloom(Amaryllis)!"

At that same moment, the Mana around Julis condensed to one point and heat swirled around it.

The huge fireballs rushed from her hand, sizzling as they approached Doroteo — A direct hit.

As the flames explosively expanded, a scorching flower with six petals opened its bud.

—However.

"Hahaha! A greeting all of a sudden, eh. Petalblaze Witch."

Responding in a muffled voice, a black silhouette slowly appeared, floating in the center of that flame flower.

The figure of a knight clad in western-style plate armor appeared as if shaking off the flames.

Of course, it was not just ordinary armor. It would be impossible to defend against Julis' flames otherwise.

"That's a fairly fast change of clothes. I guess that the nickname of Armored Magician(Brightwen) isn't just for show."

Said Julis, while she activated Aspera Spina and took a stance. It was apparently within her range of expectations that he would successfully defend against her attack.

The Armored Magician(Brightwen).

As the name suggested, Doroteo's ability created an armor which boasted of a high defense power. That armor, which covered his whole body, was solid and could repel any ordinary attacks.

That said, judging only from defense power, it did not seem to be as strong as Ardi's defensive barrier; and armor getting destroyed by meteor arts was not rare, either.

The only troublesome thing was, the armor is the product of an ability, it would be immediately restored even if broken, and returned to its original form. In addition, since the school badge was attached to the chest of the uniform, there would be no meaning to attack, except if it was an attack which reached even the inside the armor (In the Stella Carta, if the school badge was exposed at a predetermined position at the time that the match start was announced, it was admitted that one could protect it by his ability afterwards).

And, another thing—

"Well then, next is my turn, I guess."

Doroteo thrust out his left hand. In front of him countless small thin plates appeared and combined one after another.

They built up a layer before one's eyes; soon a huge warhorse clad in armor — no, a horse-shaped piece of armor appeared there. The horse trembled as if alive, and Doroteo, whose whole body was covered in armor, mounted it with experienced hands. After that, Doroteo activated his Lux; a very long equestrian spear manifested.

His appearance was that of a knight, out of an old story.

"Hou, you're going all out from the start." Julis noted.

"It's natural since I'm up against the Petalblaze Witch."

While replying, equestrian spear in hand, Doroteo lightly kicked the horse's belly. The horse, directed at Julis, and ran off at a fierce speed. Even though its movements were not comparable to that of a living horse, it was much faster than the real thing.

"Let's go, Petalblaze Witch!" Doroteo, equestrian spear in his right hand, fiercely attacked Julis perfectly as a horse and rider unit.

"Julis...!" Ayato unintentionally raised his voice...

"—Your opponent is me, right?" Elliot declared.

Ayato, had a sharp sword slash struck out to his side.

"!"

He reflexively moved his body and retreated to a safer distance.

Elliot, who took up a half-body posture in the Garrardsworth style, floated a light smile. The Lux, which was grasped in his hand, was a one-handed claymore^[10].

"Amagiri Ayato-san. I have been looking forward to fighting against you. Don't keep me waiting too long."

"...Sorry for that."

Elliot's tone was calm; but even though the sword slash which was released made Ayato take a stance, it was fraught with enough bloodlust.

"By the way, what happened to Ser-Versta? Don't tell me you're stingy to pay^[11]."

"Unfortunately, I can't use it now due to some circumstances. It isn't as if I underestimate you, so please don't misunderstand."

"Hmm... circumstances, eh. Well, it's fine."

Though Elliot seemed to be somewhat dissatisfied, a strong light shone in his eyes as he immediately pulled himself together.

"That sword skill which our president praised highly, show me how strong it is...!"

The next moment, a thrust was let out; Ayato followed the approaching strike with his eyes.

"Kuh...!"

It was fast. It came at a speed which was not inferior, even, to Kirin's.

—But, it was slightly light.

As Ayato barely flipped the point of the sword, he brandished his sword as if shifting his body—

"—!?"

Just before he swung downward, he noticed it.

He promptly leaped back as a sword strike grazed his flank.

If Ayato's reaction was late, even a little, Elliot's sword would have definitely gouged out his flank.

It was a counter of that much perfect timing.

"Huh? So it was dodged... Now that's odd."

Elliot muttered wonderingly.

"That just now, I haven't showed it yet in this tournament."

Certainly, within Elliot's data, there was no such situation where he used a counter like he did now.

Actually, Ayato's impression of Elliot was that his body was soft; even still, he was a genius fencer of versatile style which incorporates diversified attacks. Attacks not bound by any style while still conforming to basics.

It looked like he had to revise that opinion.

"I see... So you're good at counterattacking (counter are your forte). I didn't think that you would launch a counter from that posture."

In other words, the first blow was probably a decoy.

"Well, it's certainly so."

While once again returning to his stance, Elliot pouted; he seemed slightly dissatisfied.

"Counter isn't my only weapon after all...!"

While saying that, Elliot shortened the distance between them.

A lower stance where the tip of the sword skimmed the ground — it suddenly jumped up, drawing an arc to evade Ayato's sword, which now was positioned to defend.

"Oops...!"

Sword slashes which form an arc by turning the wrist, and thrust techniques with extension were peculiarities of the one-handed fencing of the Garrardsworth style. It was the polar opposite of the Amagiri Bright Dragon Style fencing which built up weight and sharpness by conveying the movement of the whole body. Although it was inferior in power to Amagiri Bright Dragon Style by just that much, each blow was quick.

Although he saw an opportunity and tried to counterattack while somehow eluding Elliot's fierce attacks head-on, a sharper counter attacked him at that moment. There was nothing more troublesome than this.

"As expected, I'm not surprised if I say so myself...!"

When the Luxes violently clashed, peculiar sparks scattered, and the weapons continuously resounded from each strike.

Not only sword techniques, but also combinations of attacks, maintaining distance, instant tactics, however you look at them, there was no room to doubt Elliot's wisdom. Above all else, his timing to make a counter was an innate disposition.

If it was only talent, he might be equal to Kirin.

"However, as expected, your sword — is still light."

Not in power, but in resolution.

As Ayato forcibly shortened the distance and repelled Elliot's sword, he let out a thrust aiming at the school badge on his chest.

"Fufufu! You're good!"

Elliot, as if waiting for it, twisted his body, readjusted his stance, and released a thrust timed to Ayato's thrust. At the same time, he twisted his wrist, circling Ayato's sword, as if to entrap it.

—But.

"Wha...!?"

Before that, Ayato had pulled back the arm which he had stretched out.

In that moment, he raised the point of his sword and knocked up Elliot's sword.

"Amagiri Bright Dragon Style Sword Intermediate Technique — "Twin Ghost Bee""

After weaving his way through the opening which was made, Ayato's thrust flashed again.

"Elliot Forster, badge broken."

The school badge on his chest was destroyed; Elliot widened his eyes with an aghast expression.

"N-No way..."

To Elliot, who feebly sank to the ground, Ayato secretly smiled wryly.

This young boy would probably become a terrifying swordsman in several years.

That said, it would depend on how much he could put into his swordsmanship.

"Now, then..."

Ayato took a small breath and turned his gaze towards Julis.

And, the fight over there was also just about to conclude.

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"Let's go, Petalblaze Witch!"

"Kuh...!"

Julis, while rolling over, just barely evaded the blow from Doroteo, who charged in while riding the horse. If she was hit by the point of the equestrian spear, which was sharp enough to tear through the wind, as they passed by each other, it would probably be the end for her.

(It's much faster than I imagined...! Besides, what power...!)

Julis immediately stood up, and repositioning Aspera Spina as she did.

Doroteo had a good lance charge, and Julis should have also seen some video images of his matches, but—

"When actually confronting it, I didn't think it would be so terrifying..."

The attack, in itself, was simple.

However, that's why dealing with it was difficult.

"...As expected, there's no other way but to hold him down with power. Huh."

Doroteo, who charged through, made a U-turn. Once again, he turned the horse towards Julis.

Julis unintentionally felt admiration for his fluid movements.

The image serving as the basis controlled everything about the Ability of Strega and Dante.

As for this attack, when thinking logically, there was no need to expressly create a horse. It just took time; he should be able to create plenty of simpler things.

But, depending on how well one can build that image within oneself, the precision greatly fluctuated. For Doroteo, this was probably the most suitable form.

"Ooooooooooh!" Doroteo raised a roar and charged again.

"—Bloom proudly, Dancing nine-spirering-flower(Primrose)!"

As Julis instantly activated her ability, she threw all nine fireballs at Doroteo who was coming from the front.

But, even when hit directly, Doroteo paid it no mind it and his momentum did not decrease at all. Although the parts of the armor that were directly hit were slightly destroyed, they restored instantly.

"Haaah!"

"—!"

The equestrian spear went through the air beside Julis, who had evaded it.

It was more accurate than a while ago. He had read Julis' movement and adjusted his tactics accordingly.

(As this rate, I will be done for...)

Julis imagined that, floated a wry smile and shivered.

Of course, she did not intend to wait for it quietly.

"Come out — Red Wall of Shearing Flame Petals(Loropetalum)!"

Julis swung Aspera Spina once; she activated one at a time the setting type abilities which had been set.

She used the wall of flames that she had used before when she fought against the pair of Word Dragon. However instead of a continuous wall this time, it blew up as several pieces that stood one in front of each other.

The lance charge, on top of its excellent quality, need a certain run-up distance to display it's real power. If he was to make a detour to evade such an obstacle, he would inevitably have to sacrifice the speed and power.

However, Doroteo completely crushed Julis' expectation.

"Ooooooooooooooooooh!"

"Impossible!?"

Of all things, Doroteo charged head on through the wall of flames.

The horse which jumped high appeared as it broke through the wall of flames, and Doroteo on horseback set up the spear.

"Bloom proudly — Great Crimson Heart Blazing Shield (Anthurium)!"

Julis manifested a shield of flames, but probably because it was instantaneous, the concentration of prana was incomplete, and she could not gather up Mana. Even then it barely took a shape and Doroteo's equestrian spear easily smashed it.

"Guh!"

Collected Mana scattered and Julis' body was blown off in that impact.

Fortunately thanks to that, she avoided being skewered (becoming a human shish-kabob); but while Julis raised her body, Doroteo had already prepared for the fourth charge.

He probably intended to settle the match soon. She could tell it with the atmosphere which became tense.

"...All right, just what I want. Bloom proudly — White Firebloom of the Sharp Spear(Longiflorum)!"

After Julis stood up, she cancelled the Red Wall of Shearing Flame Petals(Loropetalum) and manifested the spear of flames.

"Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooh!"

Raising a conspicuously big roar, Doroteo charged.

Even the spear of flames shot by Julis, which collided with Doroteo's equestrian spear, still did not stop Doroteo.

While receiving a direct hit on his chest, which he ignored, he let out a thrust using his whole body, but—

"...!"

It just slightly grazed the edge of Julis' clothes and did not hit her body.

"Hmm... It looked like my spear have reached first apparently."

As Julis smiled as she was relieved, she slowly turned around.

There Doroteo, who had charged by Julis' side, fell off of the horse's back.

『"O-Oooh! What on earth happened? Player Remus fell down! Most of the attacks of the Riessfeld player did not seem to be effective, but..."』

While listening to the voice of live reporter, who sounded slightly perplexed, Julis walked up to Doroteo.

As he could no longer maintain his ability, the armor and horse disintegrated.

"Geez, you're an unreasonable man."

As Julis spoke so to him, Doroteo, who looked upward, spat out a rough breath and floated a smile on his face which had become bright red.

"...I wanted to settle the match quickly. After all, I had no chance of winning even if it was drawn out anyway."

Right. No matter how much Doroteo defended himself from Julis' flames with his armor, he could not defend against its heat. If he was struck by that much flame, the inside of the armor must have been a high temperature, so high that he could no longer endure.

That was Julis' aim from the beginning, and Doroteo knew her aim.

It was precisely because he knew it that he wanted to settle the match before that.

"Even if you wanted to end it quickly, plunging into the wall of flames was going too far. If not for that, you would have held on a little longer."

"...I simply lost the bet. It can't be helped."

As Doroteo replied with a somewhat refreshed expression, he pointed at his chest.

"Now, do it quickly."

Julis nodded and broke his school badge with Aspera Spina.

"Doroteo Remus, badge broken."

There was dissonance in their abilities and this time, by chance, it was advantageous to Julis. That said, victory was still a victory.

As Julis took a small breath, she turned her gaze towards Ayato.

And, the fight on his side had also just reached the conclusion.

"Winner, Amagiri Ayato & Julis-Alexia van Riessfeld!"

The mechanical voice which resounded in the hall was drowned out by the loud cheers of the spectators.

After exchanging a small smile to each other, Ayato and Julis, however, immediately left the stage with serious expressions.

Chapter 4 – Efforts

The redevelopment area was the place which historically became the stage of the <Dusk of Jade>. A big incident unparalleled in all of Asterisk history. At that time, the whole area was completely blockaded; the Star Hunter Guards Captain, Helga Lindvall, who was active during the incident, was the one who lowered the curtain. Regretfully, the damage was serious and the formation of the restoration budget progressed slowly after the incident was resolved and liabilities investigated. In the meantime, the delinquent students who centered on Le Wolfe Black Institute occupied the area as their headquarters. When it came to repeat skirmishes with the Hunter Guards, the dropout students of each academy and criminals outside the city also began to gather. Before long, it became the fine underworld that it is today.

However, it was not as if the whole area of the redevelopment area was a hotbed of criminals; The Entertainment district(Rotlicht), which was located on the outer edge of the district, was relatively calm and safe, and as long as one was not to enter into a slum, they would not be in too much danger.

In addition, some buildings were at risk of collapse so nobody approached them; such abandoned buildings were scattered all over the place.

Claudia believed that the criminal was probably using one such abandoned building as a hideout.

"It looks like it isn't here, either..."

Kirin muttered with a grim face, while looking at a map displayed in the space window.

Red dots were blinking here and there on the map, and all those dots seemed to represent the ramshackle abandoned buildings. It was the data which had been sent by Claudia; it seemed there were times when she had to find this kind of abandoned building before and the ones who misappropriated them.

Of course, there was no doubt that the map helped, but there were still too many for just the two of them to search. Moreover, Le Wolfe possessed the only detailed data of the redevelopment area and that did not seem to be all; Saya had no sense of direction, therefore they could not search separately.

That said, if the criminal who kidnapped Flora was really a secret agent of Le Wolfe, facing him alone would be dangerous, so this might be for the better.

"...Anyway, we can do nothing but eliminate them one by one."

Although Saya, who walked beside Kirin, had her usual expression, impatience could be faintly felt in her words.

"You're right. Well then the next is... Uwah!"

While starting to walk after nodding to Saya's words, an acute pain ran through Kirin's right leg.

It was the part she injured during the battle against Ardi.

"...Overdoing is strictly prohibited."

"N, No...! This much is nothing after all!"

Though she had unintentionally crouched down, Kirin made a forced smile and stood up at once.

Part of it was her injury, but as expected, after going through such a fierce battle, her body did not move as she wanted. She did not have enough Prana, and if anything, she wanted to avoid fighting as much as possible. Although Saya did not show it on her face, it was probably the same for her as well.

That said, if two women walked in the redevelopment area, there were guys who would pick a fight with them. Because there were not too many persistent fellows up until now, they somehow managed but the present time was still 6:00 p.m. and they did not know what would happen after the night fell.

If they knew that their opponents were Sasamiya Saya and Toudou Kirin of Seidokan, they would probably not do something like picking a fight with them so readily — after all, they were in the top four of this Phoenix — but as Claudia suggested, both girls put on hats to hide their eyes and changed into plain clothes to avoid standing out as much as possible. Unless one were to take a closer look, they would not be able to tell who they were.

"Hmm... It's Ayato."

There, Saya received a call on her portable terminal.

『"Saya, Kirin-chan, how is your situation?"』

"...Sorry. There are still no leads."

『"I see... Yes, understood. But, don't overdo it, okay? Kirin-chan's leg is in a pretty bad state, too"』

"I-It isn't true...! I'm all right!"

To Ayato's comment that made it seem as if he was watching the present situation, Kirin hurriedly shook her head.

Even though she believed he was wrong about the situation, she was happy that Ayato was worried about her.

"By the way, if you are contacting us like this... it means that your match is already over?"

『"Yeah, because of your help, we are going to the final. Thank you."』

At those words, Saya and Kirin looked at each other and smiled.

『"We will also prepare to depart immediately , so can you send us the data?"』

"Understood."

She sent the map data with marks on the parts where they had checked.

"Senpais, you have the final match tomorrow, so please don't overdo it too much."

『"Hahaha, it's all right. Well then, later again."』

Immediately after replying, he cut the communication.

With Ayato and Julis joining in, it would become a lot easier. However, finding Flora within the time would still be quite difficult. There were still many places they had yet to search.

"...Let's go, Kirin."

"Yes."

Catching to Saya, who started to walk, Kirin greatly nodded.

Anyway, it would be no use to over think it. As Saya said just now, they could do nothing but steadily eliminate the likely places.

"But, I'm glad that the Senpais safely won and advanced to the final."

"It's only natural if it's Ayato."

In Saya's response, a slight proudness could be detected.

"Next is the final at last, huh..."

"However, I think that even for Ayato, it will be tough to win against those guys without Ser-Versta."

"...You're right."

Kirin and Saya knew more than anyone else the strength of the opponents Ayato and Julis would fight in the finals. What's more, with their rapid learning speed, Ardi and Rimsi, who would show up in the final, would probably become much tougher than at the semifinal.

"..."

Then, Saya's feet suddenly stopped.

"Saya-san...?"

When she turned around, Saya looked down as she stood still.

"Kirin."

And in a small, trembling voice, called Kirin's name—

"—It's frustrating, eh."

Said Saya, finishing her statement.

Just then, the frustration which Kirin was also confining in her chest burned up.

"...Yes."

While clenching her fists, her voice was shaking just like Saya's, and she managed only that short answer.

Just like that, the two girls were standing motionless and silent.

Before too much time had passed Saya rubbed her eyes, raised her head and said,

"Let's go. Right now, there are still things we can do."

As Kirin nodded while chewing her lips, she followed after Saya who began to run.

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"—It looks like there is still no progress."

"Yes, I have heard it."



To Ayato's comment, Julis, who was leaned against the wall of the waiting room, curtly answered.

After the semifinal, Ayato returned to the waiting room and contacted Saya first, but as he expected, it looked like they haven't yet found anything that could be a clue.

By the way, they had skipped the winner interview as usual. They had no time for that; they were bound to ask questions about Ser-Versta anyway. They could not imprudently answer or respond to that, since they couldn't think of a good excuse, either.

"Well, in that case, it can't be helped. We should head out as well."

Said Julis who could no longer contain herself (sit still).

"You're right..."

Ayato checked the time.

Since tomorrow's final was around noon, Ayato and Julis only had a little less than 18 hours remaining. Because they were not allowed to withdraw, at least Ayato and Julis must, by any means possible, come back by that time.

No, after considering the various examinations before the match, if they did not come back to the hall at least a few hours before, they would not have enough time. For that reason, they had a little bit less time remaining.

A sound of a light knock suddenly resounded.

"Hi. Congratulations on your qualification to the final... eh?"

Eishiro who entered through an alternate entrance looked at Ayato's and Julis' faces with surprise.

"What? Isn't that quite a somber mood for the people who were able to advance to the finals safely?"

"E-Errr... There are some circumstances, you see."

Although Ayato spoke ambiguously, Eishiro seemed to have guessed the situation to some extent with that alone.

"Hmm... Well, I won't really force you to tell me, but if I can be a help to you, I will cooperate."

At these words, Ayato and Julis looked at each other.

They did not want to involve more people who weren't involved, but it was true that they wanted help.

Though Julis seemed to hesitate a little, she gave a small nod before long.

"Yabuki, before that, I would like to confirm, but..."

"I know. I won't make an article without permission."

Eishiro replied while and slowly waved his hands.

"So, what happened?"

"Actually—"

As Ayato concisely explained the situation, Eishiro contemplated with a serious expression.

It was the first time that he saw Eishiro with an expression like that.

"I see... As the president guessed, there's no doubt that Dirk Eberwein is the mastermind."

"Do you know a lot about the Black Cat Institute(Grimalkin)?"

At that question, Eishiro slowly shook his head.

"No. About that, even among the Espionage Organizations of each academy, their confidentiality is the highest. For example, speaking of the most extreme, the Nine Offspring of the Dragon of World Dragon is first, and it is said that Benetnash of Queen Veil has gathered the experts of information control. However conversely speaking, it means that such a reputation is actually known well enough for it to be ranked at least, right? There is no such information about the Black Cat Institute(Grimalkin)."

Since the well-informed Eishiro went as far as to say that about it, it was probably quite something.

"That being the case, if possible, they are people whom I don't want to get involved with... But, Circumstances are circumstances; well, it can't be helped. I'm well-informed about the redevelopment area; if it's just searching for the place where that child is, then I will help you."

"Of course, that'll be enough."

"Yes, if you find even the place, you should just leave the fighting to us. I would rather have you uninvolved in the fight."

Added Julis with a dark smile.

In that smile was the force which could truly turn a criminal into charcoal.

"I'm thankful for that... is what I would like to say, but for a frail ordinary student like me, I just want a little more insurance."

As Eishiro muttered so, he took out his portable terminal and began to search something.

"Um, that person's number is... Eh? I remember having registered it..."

"I don't understand somehow, but time is precious now. If it is likely to take time, we will go ahead."

Even with Julis urging him like that, Eishiro shrugged his shoulders as he smiled wryly.

"All right. Well, I'll see what I can do on my side, but don't expect too much."

Ayato who was watching that exchange suddenly came up with an idea.

"—I see. Julis, I also want to contact another line just a little."

"Another line, you say?"

Julis suspiciously frowned.

After immediately understanding his intentions, she put a hand on her waist and displayed a complicated expression.

"I don't mind, but... I think that asking will be useless."

"I think that it will be tough, but we may get information which could end up being a hint. For the time being, I will ask to see what they would say."

After replying, Ayato took out his portable terminal like Eishiro did.

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The appointed meeting place was a gloomy coffee shop in the outskirts of the commercial area.

As he sat on a back seat alongside a wall as they were told, a voice low of a woman calmly sounded from behind.

"—So, you came. Ah, don't turn around."

In compliance to the owner of the voice — Irene Urzaiz, he expressed his thanks while continuing to face forward.

"Understood... But it would have been fine even if you didn't come all the way here."

"Are you a fool? We can't possibly talk about such a thing via electronic communications. Think about my position, as well, geez."

She said with an astonished voice.

"S-Sorry."

"Well, it's fine. So, I will say from the start. You won't hear anything from me."

"...I see."

Though regrettable, it was the answer Ayato expected to some extent.

He thought that if it was Irene, who was well informed about Le Wolfe's circumstances, she might know something about this matter, but the fact that Irene was under Dirk's control even now had not changed. He was aware that she was not in position to cooperate at a moment's notice.

"Don't misunderstand. It isn't as if I was forbidden to speak by that bastard Dirk. It's rather the opposite."

"The opposite...?"

"First of all, this matter is certainly Dirk's doing. It's probably right to also assume that the Black Cat Institute(Grimalkin) is involved. But such a thing, even you realized immediately, right? Then, after following that train of thought, it's likely to think that you will contact me, who am your only go-between at Le Wolfe. Leaving aside the fact of whether or not I will cooperate, that is."

Since that was true, Ayato gave a small nod.

"Did you really think that, that <Tyrant> didn't already come to that conclusion?"

"Ah..."

Now that she mentioned it, it was certainly so.

There was no way that that young man who excelled at schemes and strategy would not be able to realize such a simple thing.

"Nevertheless, I didn't receive any notification. In other words, that guy knows that the amount of information I hold would be of no use."

Irene continued with a somewhat frustrated tone.

"In the first place, as I said before, we, Dirk's protégés, and the Black Cat Institute(Grimalkin) are completely different organizations. For my part, I also possess information about the 'cats' at least to some extent, but even that isn't something reliable."

"..."

There was a strong persuasive power in Irene's words.

Because Irene was in close contact with Dirk, she probably knew his ability well.

In the end, it meant there was no other method except for searching on foot.

Just to have understood it, it could be considered as better than nothing.

"Understood. Thank you, you really helped us."

"...Wait, Amagiri."

Irene stopped Ayato who was about to leave his seat.

"It's true that I have no information. But, if you're all right with a guess, I can tell it."

"A guess?"

"It's to the bitter end just a guess. There is no evidence. Still, is it all right?"

"Of course."

Right now, they wanted a clue even if it was not a big one.

"You have narrowed down to the abandoned buildings of the redevelopment area and were searching there, right?"

"Ah, yes. We are searching around the places which Claudia picked up... What about it?"

"If you think normally about it, it's probably correct. We also use those places for missions, and actually, I've also heard that the 'cats' use it for hideout. But — I thought that it was a delicate place when it comes to kidnapping."

"What do you mean?"

As Irene breathed a big sigh, she continued her words.

"Even when they use a building there as their base, they normally move out in a short time. It isn't a place they can use for a long time."

"Ah, because there is danger of collapse or something like that?"

Certainly, it would not feel good to be all the time in an abandoned building which could collapse at any time.

"If it was only for that, I think they would just have to reinforce it. The first reason is the Hunter Guards."

Irene snorted in a low sound with her back.

"Those guys aren't idiots. Since they know that place has become the hangout of criminals, they periodically patrol. Of course, it isn't as if they tightly tour the whole area, but there are a lot of people among them with detection ability. That place isn't fit for a crime like kidnapping where one has to hide himself in the same place for a certain period of time."

Come to think of it, he had heard that since Dante and Strega with detection ability were required when forming a team in police organization and military, and that they were treated quite well.

"It isn't as if there is no method to deceive detection abilities, but it will require time and effort. Since it's basic for 'cat' to execute their missions in solo, whether or not they will be careful up to there, I don't know..."

"In other words, you think that it isn't an abandoned building that the criminal lies hidden in."

"—I just say that there is also that possibility."

Irene had carefully chosen her words.

"Then, in case you're right... Where on earth would they hide?"

"I don't know. However, for you the most troublesome area is probably the Entertainment district(Rotlicht)."

The Entertainment district(Rotlicht).

That place which was located in outer edge part of the redevelopment area seemed to be a place which had some interesting activities^[12]. Though that said, he had only heard it from others and had not yet set foot there.

"If it's the abandoned buildings, you would be able to go around searching as you please, but in the Entertainment district(Rotlicht), the shops crowd together regardless of legal or illegal. You guys can't willfully break in there, can you?"

"That's right... but in that case, that means there is another conspirator who is sheltering them, right? But didn't you say a while ago, the 'cats' basically move alone...?"

"Of course, for those guys, the one thing they mustn't do is let the connection to the academy be revealed. They definitely wouldn't use Le Wolfe's name or Dirk's intermediary. However, as long as money is paid, they would be quite willing to do so. Otherwise — there's also the option of brute force."

"I see..."

"But... even so if you ask me which it is, it's correct that using a suitable abandoned building is rather safe. However it is, in the end, a guess after all."

Even so, what Irene said makes sense.

Though they didn't have enough help, the Entertainment district(Rotlicht) should also be put in the search range.

"Thank you. I will take what you say into consideration."

As Ayato said so, this time for sure he left his seat.

"Do your best. And one more thing—"

At the moment she went past Ayato, Irene suddenly placed something on the table.

"That's a present from Priscilla."

After receiving the small packet, Ayato left the shop.

When he checked the contents after walking for a while, he found a light meal in which sandwiched cheese, dry-cured ham, vegetables and the like was contained.

"This is helpful..."

Since he would probably not have time to leisurely take a meal from now on, he was frankly thankful for this present.

He would have to thank Priscilla for it later.

"Well for the time being, I should discuss this with Julis..."

If they also had to take the possibility of Entertainment district(Rotlicht) in consideration, it might be necessary to reconsider the distribution of people.

Ayato took out his portable terminal and called Julis' number.

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"By the way, Master, although I'm really grateful; I would, by all means, like to ask something — is that all right?"

Allekant Academy, Ernesta's laboratory; in the basement of the academy's research building.

While a machine of automatic control moved around restlessly, Ardi who was laid in the center talked with a somewhat serious tone.

"Hmm? It's really rare for you to ask something, Ardi."

Ernesta who was tapping away on multiple optical keyboards in the control room, which was separated by reinforced hard glass, responded while continuing to type.

"Though I say that, I have my hands full with Rimsi now, so wait just a little."

Rimsi was lying down next to Ardi, and Ernesta was fully focused on her repair for the moment. After all compared to Ardi, Rimsi's damage was much more considerable. Especially since her left arm was almost in a totally destroyed state, and it had to be completely replaced.

Since Ruinsharif itself was Camilla's charge, she was left with its repair; but Camilla should also be busy with the adjustment of spare parts, sometime around now, in her laboratory.

As for Ardi, the damage was by no means negligible. At first glance, one thought that there was only the scratch on the outer layer armor, but upon closer inspection, one understood that the scratch was much deeper than they had thought.

The two's armor was a special steel that was one of the new high-tech materials, which the Dark Lady Faction(Sonnet) collected. It was the essence of the Meteoric Engineering. Originally, one should not even be able to scratch it with just a Nihontou, but that showed how truly frightening Toudou Kirin's ability was.

"I must finish your repairs by tomorrow's finals. As expected even I will have to pull an all-nighter tonight."

"No, no, I do not mean to cause Master trouble. I was wondering whether it would be possible for you to leave this sword cut carved on my face."

At these words, Ernesta's hands stopped.

"Provided that the internal repairs are completed, I don't really mind..."

The sword cut on the head had damaged some sensors, but since it would be finished with component replacements only, the repair was relatively easy.

"But, I will have you let me put reinforcement inside."

"Very well then."

Ardi nodded in satisfaction.

"So, why did you expressly think of wanting to leave the scratch?"

"—It is as proof of this fight, of course."

"Hou, meaning it's a decoration of victory?"

"Hmm, no, it is not such an outrageous thing..."

After pondering a little, Ardi slowly continued.

"I learned various things through this battle. What I saw in that match exposed my imperfection, this was not simple learning of data, but what humans calls — right, growth! I take pride in the fact that I obtained a definite growth! I want to leave a proof of that!"

"...Wonderful."

Ernesta reflexively muttered.

One sought perfection because of his imperfection. But there is no perfect existence in this world. Therefore, one could never stop evolving.

Ardi and Rimsi were, in the end, only experimental types, but it might be said that Ernesta had already approached the complete form of the autonomous type puppets which was, ultimately, her ideal.

"Then Master, I also have one request."

Rimsi who was lying down silently until then said in a calm voice.

"Oh, even Rimsi! Fine, fine, you can say anything. Mother^[13] is in a good mood now, so I will listen to you as much as possible."

"Then, though presumptuous, I shall speak. On the occasion of the limit control transfer to Ardi, I have no problem with the separation of equipment, but..."

"Yes. And then, and then?"

"You can reduce the amount the amount of external armor separation a little more, but it would help even if you could only partially adjust it. —Since it's embarrassing."

Rimsi indifferently said with her usual cold expression which did not changed at all.

But, when looking closely, a color of shyness was slightly noticeable on her face.

Certainly, Rimsi's appearance after she transferred all her external armor to Ardi, from a human's perspective, was almost near stark nakedness.

However, since there was a technical problem with that, she could not fulfill Rimsi's request immediately.

"Errr... I will take proper measures."

"...Yes."

It looked like the nuance was transmitted; Rimsi nodded as she resigned herself.

Unlike Ardi, Rimsi was a puppet made with a consciousness nearer to that of a human's. Originally, it should have been the case even in terms of emotional expression, but as the experiment had turned out, that was richer in case of Ardi.

(As expected this is because of that thing...)

Still, asking for such a request should be regarded as good growth.

"...This also is thanks to Sasamiya Saya-chan and Toudou Kirin-chan."

As expected, it seemed that fighting with formidable enemy is something which can make people grow.

Preferably, she also wanted it to be like that during the final, but—

"I wonder how it will be."

Ernesta remembered the ill-humored face of the <Tyrant> and deeply sighed.

Chapter 5 – A Chance Meeting

Compared to the entire redevelopment area, the Entertainment district(Rotlicht) was not that big. It would be no more than around one-fifth of the its size.

However, the main street overflowed with people, and even if subtracting the fact that the Festa was currently being held, the activity there was by no means inferior to that of a first-class site in the commercial area.

Even so, the atmosphere and scenery were completely different.

A passage ran through the spaces between the rows of shops, and skywalks covered the sky. The pillars supporting them were scattered here and there, and order could not be found there at all. Of course, it was only here in Asterisk City that such disorder was permitted.

The shops; ranged from restaurants mainly involving the offering of alcoholic beverages, such as clubs and bars, to illegal stores, such as underground casinos and brothels, and the age-group of people coming and going seemed to be somewhat diverse. Adolescents, who appeared to be around the age of students were also hardly rare, but there was no one wearing a school badge. Since students were normally not allowed to take off their school badges when going outside the academy, assuming those same adolescents were students, it was a violation of the Stella Carta, even if only a small one.

Although the Hunter Guards also patrolled in the Entertainment district(Rotlicht), students did not seem to be targeted in the cases occuring small violations. It was said that the Hunter Guards were always understaffed, so there would be no end to it if they began to do so. Interactions with illegal stores were also the same, and unless it was exceptionally malignant, there was said to be the form of tacit approval. There was also an assumed connection between the Entertainment district(Rotlicht) and the City Parliament around here, and it was referred to as one of the dark sides of Asterisk.

While muttering to himself, Ayato thought back to the information about the Entertainment district(Rotlicht) which he had gotten from Eishiro.

After consulting Julis and company, and looking at it generally, he came to the conclusion of whether an abandoned building was the most likely as

the criminal's lair. That said, Irene's guess was also persuasive and he was reluctant to discard it.

So, Ayato had to take charge of the search in the Entertainment district(Rotlicht) for the time being, but — it was more difficult than he thought.

After all, he did not even know how many shops there were, and he could not willfully break in like Irene said. If he stopped walking, a customer-puller^[14] would immediately come, and he could not stop being forcibly brought to a shop more than once or twice. And it was pointless to sneak in secretly when it was overflowing with so many people; in the first place, there were too many shops.

He had tried indirectly asked a customer-puller about Flora, as well, but naturally, he did not get a useful answer.

Meanwhile, time mercilessly ticked away, and it was already late at night. Even so, the main street glowed with a dazzling shine and the hustle and bustle also seemed to be increasing more and more.

According to Eishiro, since the Entertainment district(Rotlicht) during the daytime completely changed as there were very few people, normally, he should wait until that time to continue searching, but Ayato and company, unfortunately, had no time to do so.

"However — it will take a little time."

Certainly, in this town, as long as you piled up money, it was probably not too difficult to find people who could provide you a room without even asking the reason.

As Ayato put his thoughts in order, he went ahead to the back alley which entered from the main street.

Still, the abandoned buildings of the redevelopment area whose back alley, where the hustle and bustle of the main street could not be heard, was dead silent; the shops were not standing in a line, and lights which seemed to be from shops gradually stretched out beyond the faint streetlight.

Though unlike the main street, customer-pullers did not come out and there were no signboards either, when seeing the place where some people who seemed to be customers entered, they were probably doing

business. Since the people from earlier seemed to be rich judging from their attire, there might possibly be a high class store membership system.

While slowly walking through that back alley, Ayato thought about something.

"If the criminal was really hiding himself in this Entertainment district(Rotlicht), it would be—"

"...Hey, you there."

A voice from behind was suddenly heard by Ayato.

When he looked back, three men with very sharp eyes were glaring at Ayato as if assessing him.

"Errr... what is it?"

The men gave off a dangerous aura, so it was hard to say it was a calm (friendly) atmosphere.

"It's you, isn't it? The bastard who for some reason is snooping around this area."

"You don't seem to be a dog of the Hunter Guards, but... Bring your mug here a little? We would like you to tell us in detail what you are doing here."

The men seemed to be underlings of the Mafia managing this Entertainment district(Rotlicht). He intended to be careful as to not attract suspicion as much as possible, but as expected, he was probably more cautious than usual. Their reaction came much earlier than he expected.

However, Ayato had also covered his face, as Saya and Kirin had, so he would not be as easily found out — though saying that, he just pulled up the hood of a parka and wore glasses with no degree — his identity was apparently not exposed yet.

"No, I was just looking for someone..."

While saying that, Ayato quickly gauges the men's abilities.

Judging from the kneading and movement of Prana, they did not seem to be that strong. Since the Ayato could now freely remove his seal to some extent, he could probably drive them away without too much trouble.

That said, it was not wise to make matters worse here. He could not talk about the reason, either; in the first place, it did not seem that he could make them understand.

In that case—

"! Hey, wait!"

Ayato immediately changed his course of action, and ran away at full speed.

Though the men's angry voices resounded from behind, he, naturally, had no intention of waiting.

The problem was whether he should escape to the bright but crowded main street or deeper into the dark back alley.

He did not want to stand out very much, but there was a time when he had been cornered due to his lack of familiarity with the area when he had helped Priscilla near the redevelopment area. So, he would rather slip into the crowd of people.

Thinking allong thoes lines, it was good that Ayato came back to the main street, but he immediately noticed it was a mistake.

This was because people, clad in the same atmosphere as the men of earlier, were keeping a watchful eye, here and there, on the main street.

"It's bad" he thought; there was sign of men approaching from behind. He could not backtrack.

However, if he went in the main street as is, it would be just a matter of time for him to be found.

(What do I do...?)

After a moment's hesitation, the moment Ayato was going to step forward.

"—Hey, you. Are you perhaps pursued?"

A small voice suddenly struck Ayato's ears.

Within the traffic jam and the hustle and bustle, a voice so quiet that it would not be strange if he failed to hear it.

However, that voice seized Ayato's consciousness just like magic and led his eyes to the owner of the voice.

"Since you are in trouble, shall I help you?"

A little bit in front of Ayato, a girl, who was leaned back on a pillar that was supporting a corridor, said that, smiling with only her mouth.

Ayato could not see her face because she was wearing a large hat that hid her eyes, but she seemed to be approximately the same age as him. Her chestnut hair was casually tied up in a bundle and she wore a somewhat loose blouse with jeans. She had an overall plain impression; if she did not call out to him, Ayato would have passed by without noticing her presence and it would probably not remain in his memory, either.

"Um... Have we met somewhere before?"

He felt like he had heard that voice somewhere and gave a question in response.

"Eh—? I think it's probably our first meeting though... More importantly, if you are too carefree, those behind you will catch up."

As he looked back startled by the girl's words, the men from earlier were already a short distance away from him.

He did not know who this girl was. It was also likely to be some kind of trap.

But, Ayato strangely felt that there was no lie in these words of the girl.

It was not by reason, but by intuition.

"—Understood. Can you help me?"

"OK. Then, come on, this way, this way!"

Then, the girl took Ayato's hand and ran off the back alley in the opposite side.

The men who noticed it raised their voices and chased them, but the girl, gave it no mind, and advanced while turning to the left, and then towards the thin alley at his right. She seemed to be quite familiar with this neighborhood.

"..."

While the girl ran in the alley, she was humming something in a low voice.



He did not understand what she was saying as it was in too quiet of a voice, but it seemed to be a song.

At that moment, Ayato noticed that Mana was rustling around the girl.

(Don't tell me this girl, is she a Strega...?)

The men's presence became more distant, and their voices steadily got lower, too.

At the same time, the townscape suddenly changed, and before he noticed, their surroundings had become, for the most part, abandoned buildings which were about to collapse.

The girl was running fast and her hand which held Ayato's was surprisingly soft. Since her Prana was too quiet, he did notice at first, but this girl being a Strega meant, she was a Starpulse Generation, as well. Judging from her age, she was probably a student of some academy.

Because she was not even showing signs of being out of breath even after running for a while now, one could understand that she was well-trained.

However, he could not predict her ability because she concealed it well.

"Phew... Now that we come so far, it will be all right for the time being, I guess."

After they had finally arrived at a little open space surrounded by abandoned buildings, the girl turned back and floated a small smile.

"Thank you. You really helped me out."

Ayato would probably have been unable to get through this by himself.

"Fufufu... So, why were you chased by those guys? Did you rip off someone or some shop?"

"No, it isn't something like that, but... it's nothing."

At least, the girl did not seem to be an enemy, but he could not also afford to carelessly speak about his circumstances.

As he spoke ambiguously, the girl nodded as she guessed it.

"Hmm, I see. Then, it's all right even if you don't want to talk about it."

She said, as she sat on a suitable piece of scrap wood.

"However, if you intend to go back, it would be better to wait for a while. Since this place is quite distant from the Entertainment district(Rotlicht), those guys probably won't chase us up to here, but it's kind of edgy now and I think that those guys also haven't given up yet."

"It's kind of edgy?"

"We're right in the middle of the Festa now, so the Hunter Guard crackdown is much more severe than usual. Also, the Mafia guys who control the Entertainment district(Rotlicht) seemed to have increased their number of patrols and are more cautious than usual."

"I see..."

During the time the Festa was being held, people thronged to Asterisk from all over the world. It was probably inevitable that the number of people showing up in this Entertainment district(Rotlicht) would also increase. In that case, no matter how common the state of connivance was in the Entertainment district(Rotlicht), it was also necessary for the Hunter Guards to increase their manpower and control to some extent.

However, the unsuitable circumstances would make it more difficult for the criminal to hide himself. Though it was also so for the reinforcement of control, people who wanted to take on something troublesome during such a time would probably be few.

(It isn't the Entertainment district(Rotlicht) after all...?)

If so, then he should give up and look for other places as soon as possible. He could not afford to waste time here.

It was also not as if there was no more room of hesitation, but—

"Thank you for everything. If possible, I would like to do something to show my gratitude, but I'm somewhat running out of time now."

"It's all right, it's all right, I don't really mind — Amagiri Ayato-kun."

"!"

"Oh, what an amazing reaction speed. As expected of a finalist of the current tournament."

As Ayato promptly took a distance, the girl clapped her hands in admiration.

"But, it kind of a shock when you brace yourself so much."

"...Why do you know my name?"

As Ayato cautiously asked, the girl exaggeratedly shrugged her shoulders.

"You intended to disguise yourself, right? But, like that, you will be found out at first glance. If you intend to hide it, then you have to change your atmosphere more. You're also already a celebrity, so shouldn't you try a little harder?"

"Eh...?"

Certainly, he had not cared about it that much, but was it so obvious?

"Just to make things clear, but it isn't really because you're the rank #1 of the Seidoukan Academy that I helped you."

"But, then why...?"

"It's natural to help people in trouble, right?"

At Ayato's question, the girl answered as if it was a matter of course.

"Well, when you can afford it, that's. Besides you didn't look like a bad person."

The girl's words were frank, and it did not seem like she was telling lies.

"...Sorry. Even though you help me."

Thus, Ayato honestly apologized for his impoliteness.

"Hahaha, you're a good person, eh. Yes, I don't really—"

But, the girl suddenly stopped speaking and turned her head to the direction where they had come from.

Ayato also noticed a moment later.

Someone was coming their way.

"Good grief, to think that you would escape to here... I'm also used to running after people."

Languidly said a man who appeared, the moonlight illuminating half of his body.

With an unshaven face and dark skin, his age was probably around 30. At least, he was probably not a student. He had a rough attire of cargo pants and T-shirt, but the activation body of Lux on his belt was tied in bunches.

"So, is it you? The bastard who was sneakily searching. They say that you seem to be looking for someone, but since our men are concerned about it. I will have you come with me."

Ambition could not be felt at all in his dark, sluggish eyes, but his carriage had something particular only to someone who had piled up training. He was quite the master.

"Crap... I didn't think that you would chase us so far."

The girl looked up at the sky and held down her face from the top of the hat.

"I've my expenses, you see. So I've to work a little hard to earn money. Well, in saying that, I've to thank you for having made work for me... Hmm?"

As the man stopped, he opened his somewhat droopy eyes wide. During the hesitation, a slimy, cold and fiendish shine wriggled.

"What... I heard that the opponent was a man, but I see there's also a woman. This is a pleasant miscalculation, eh. I suddenly feel motivated."

While floating a vulgar smile, the man activated his Lux. Poised in both hands, a knife with oversized serrated blade seemed to lick its chops.

"Well then, I was asked to catch you and bring you in... But you may resist to your heart's content. After all, it will be boring otherwise."

"Wait a minute. She has nothing to do with it."

The man's eyes were obviously directed at the girl. Since it turned out like this, Ayato had no choice but directly speak with the Mafia member and clear the misunderstanding.

"Hmm, I think it's useless. He's the type of person who seems to give priority to his hobby over his work, so I don't think he will quietly overlook us. Isn't that so? —Former World Dragon Seventh Institute rank #7, Twin Snakes(Doiran) Nguyen-san."

"He~e... young lady, do you know about me? That makes me happy."

"I didn't know that a semifinalist of the Lindvolus would be reduced to running errands for the Mafia though."

As the girl sighed, she slowly stood up.

"What, it's an old story."

As the man, Nguyen, said that, the atmosphere of the place became very tense.

It's bad. Even if he were to fight Nguyen, he could not afford to involve the girl.

The moment he was about to step forward —in order to get between the two of them— the knife approached Ayato's chest.

"Kuh!"

Nguyen threw the knife so as to put him in check (restrain him).

Although he dodged it by promptly turning around, the timing, in which the knife was thrown, was terrifying. It might be said that his outset was spoiled.

"Don't get in the way, boy."

By the time Ayato fixed his stance, Nguyen had already entered the girl's range.

"Watch out!"

Nguyen's knife shone and attacked the girl.

—But.

"Hmm, is it only that?"

The girl easily dealt with Nguyen's onslaught of one-handed blows coming from both sides.

"Wha—!?"

Nguyen's face was distorted in surprise.

It was also the same for Ayato. Nguyen's attack was sharp and fast. It was the type of person who focused more in the number of attacks and speed than the power of each blow. Dealing with all of them —and moreover,

completely in the opponent's range— would probably be difficult even for Ayato.

"Ha, Hahahaha! You aren't bad, young lady! In that case, I'll also fight seriously...!"

"—No, it's already enough."

The girl sneaked around to Nguyen's back as she slipped past his arm.

Her movement looked like it was casual, but it was something which struck the momentary opening as if threading the eye of a needle.

"Tch!"

The girl's kick was driven in to the solar plexus of Nguyen who hurriedly turned around.

"—!"

Nguyen, who fainted in agony without even having time to release a sound, was sent flying and crashed into the wall of an abandoned building.

A shock, to such an overpowering extent, ran through it, and innumerable new cracks were carved in that wall... One wondered whether the building would collapse, or not.

"...If you were in your prime, it probably wouldn't have gone so easily." The girl said somewhat disappointedly while turning towards Nguyen, who couldn't move anymore.

Then she turned immediately towards Ayato.

"Now then... By the way you, are you looking for someone?"

"Eh...?"

"Come on, he said something like that earlier."

The girl who said so glanced at Nguyen.

"Ah... Well yes."

"Maybe I can help you, but what do you say?"

"Help me? You?"

As Ayato asked that in response, the girl smiled teasingly and turned her flexible finger upward.

"Yes. But before that... Can we change the place just for a moment?"

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The girl lightly climbed the emergency staircase of the abandoned building, which somewhat kept its form.

While following her, Ayato remembered her fight from earlier.

Nguyen was strong. No matter how weak he was in power, if he advanced to the semifinal in the Lindvolus, his strength was the real deal. People powerful enough to defeat him so easily were few in number.

"Okay, we've arrived." As they arrived at the roof, the girl said so and turned around.

It looked like it was the highest building in this area, and the redevelopment area could be overlooked from here.

Overhead, the sky was full of stars. However, the eastern sky was already changing color to deep dark blue. The dawn was near.

"Sorry, even though you're in a hurry, I'm taking your time."

"Don't be. More importantly, I'm really thankful for your help, but I can't afford to involve you. Not to mention that I've already caused you trouble."

"Hmm..."

At Ayato's words, the girl nodded in admiration.

"I see. I think that I'm beginning to understand you little by little."

"Understand me?"

"Yes. Well, for example... You're a kind person who will think of another person even if you find yourself dragged into a difficult situation. But, at the same time, you will bear the burden yourself, and thus won't rely too much on others."

"..."

Since it was almost similar to Julis's criticism towards Ayato, he was at a loss for words.

"But, the quarterfinal's match was good. Seeing the combination with Riessfeld-san, I feel like you've become a proper tag team."

"...You observe well."

That quarterfinal was actually one turning point for Ayato and Julis. But, from an outsider's perspective, it should not be something which could be understood easily.

"Naturally. Therefore today's... Ah, no that's already yesterday, huh. Anyway, I've also watched the semifinal's match properly. That match where you didn't use Ser-Versta — No, perhaps couldn't you use it?"

"..."

In addition, she was also very good at guessing.

"Hahaha, sorry. It was an unnecessary inquiry. Um, well then... Will you tell what kind of person you are looking for?"

"No, but—"

"Rest at ease. It isn't really as if I will follow you. In short, it's all right as long as you know where the person you're looking for is, right?"

As soon as the girl said so, Mana around her rustled.

It slowly gathered as if swirling around her.

"No way... Are you a detection-type Strega?"

He was wondering whether she was a person with ability, but if she really was a Strega with detection type ability, then finding out Flora's whereabouts would not be impossible.

"It isn't a detection type, but... Well, I can do something similar. And information is necessary to make an image."

"Understood. I'm looking for a 10-year-old girl. Her name is Flora."

"I want to confirm, just in case, but it isn't as if she is lost, right?"

"...Yes. She has been kidnapped. The criminal — I can guess who it is, but I'm still not sure."

"Hmm, is it good there? So, what about that child's appearance or personality? Also, it would be good if you have a photo."

Ayato told to the girl all the information he knew of Flora.

Though, Ayato had just met Flora for about a couple of days. It was not that much, but it could not be said that he knew a lot.

"If you want, I can ask a person who knows her better."

"No, it's all right. I think it will do with only this much. Wait for a bit."

As the girl said that she looked downward, and began to mutter something in a small voice.

Ayato did not fully understand, but since each person had his own method of activating their ability, that was probably her method.

"—All right, something like this."

Before long, the girl clapped her hands, and raised her face.

"But, before that, I want you to promise me only one thing... Is it fine?"

"Promise?"

"To keep it secret, and not talk to anyone about what will happen here, from now on."

"...Understood. I promise."

That much was easy to accomplish.

"Thank God. Then, to start, prepare a map. If at all possible, a big one would be best."

As he was said so, Ayato started his portable terminal.

He changed the space window's size to the maximum, and displayed the map of the whole redevelopment area.

"Okay, and then—" Ayato said and raised his gaze, and then unintentionally became speechless.

The girl took off her hat and untied her hair which was brought together.

When she touched a headphone type hair ornament, the color of her hair slowly changed.

From chestnut to vivid purple — it was exact color of the current dawn sky.

The current subdued and quiet air (atmosphere) was instantly repainted by her gorgeous, overwhelming presence.

Her breathtaking, well-featured looks however soon reminded Ayato of someone.

There were probably no people in this Asterisk... no, perhaps in this world who did not know this girl.

The Supreme Songstress.

The world's best idol.

Student Council President and rank #1 of Queen Veil Girl's Academy.

She bared the nickname of Melodious Witch(Sigrdrífa) and was the runner-up of the previous Lindvolus.

"...Sylvia Ryuneheim..." Dumbfounded as he is, Ayato muttered the girl's name.

As Sylvia smiled at the dumbfounded Ayato, she widely opened both her hands as if spreading wings.

The morning sun which was rising, cast a dazzling light from behind her.

"—The two pairs of wings (feathers) of the thought and memory, turn, turn quickly run about, carry the voice of the captive beloved child."

Completely different from what she did so far, her dignified, powerful voice sang a somewhat sad, folkloric melody.

It was natural that that voice sounded familiar to Ayato.

Even Ayato who did not hold much interest to the trends of the society knew her name, her figure and her singing voice.

"Beyond the sea of clouds of dawn, ride upon the winds of dusk, open the guidance from the end of twilight—"



「——思考と記憶の」
凜とした力強い声がどこか物悲しい民族音楽のよつな旋律を歌い上げる。
「暁の雲海を超え 黄昏の風に乗り 巡れ巡れ疾く駆け巡れ 囚われの愛し子の声を持て」

宵闇の果てより導きを開け

Sylvia's singing voice manipulated Mana which was raged like a storm and calmed it.

Sylvia was the most famous songstress and the most famous Strega at the same time in the current modern world. Even the Venomous Witch who had won the Lindvolus twice consecutively could do naught but concede to Sylvia in terms of popularity.

Her Ability —— omnipotent (versatile).

Strega and Dante originally manifested their ability with a particular image as core. Hence, even those who possessed diversified techniques like Julis could not deviate from the range of the particular image such as "flame" and "flower".

But, it was said that Sylvia Ryuneheim could change her image to any form by using the "song" as medium. For this reason, it was also possible for her to use the detection type ability like this.

It was similar to the Star Senjutsu, which was the style created in pursuit of versatility, but it might be said that its essence was the exact opposite. It did not become a fixed form (it was not stereotyped), but it had a versatility which was accomplished by fluidizing the image. Sylvia manipulated Mana by singing a song which contained the image —there seemed to be a problem pertaining to the strong and weak points of Prana consumption though— and could recall all phenomenon.

However, it seemed that the only ability she could not handle was the healing ability, but since that was an ability which could not being standardized even with Star Senjutsu, it might be a fundamentally separate ability.

"Black messenger of thought and memory, fly down before me and quickly show (it) —"

Before long, as Sylvia finished singing, two black feathers were drifting as they turned on an axis around the map. The two pieces of feathers continued rotating for a while, but the circle they were forming gradually narrowed.

"Hmm, hmm... It's on the outskirts of the Entertainment district(Rotlicht), the corner of the north side."

Sylvia casually spoke.

Though Ayato could not even now believe his own eyes, he immediately pulled himself together. Before his eyes, was an International superstar to whom there were none who did not know her name; and if her ability was the real deal, then it was no time to be surprised.

"Is Flora-chan here?"

"Yes, unless the opponent does take very powerful anti-detection ability measures, there's no doubt about it. If I have a little more time to knead, I will be able to narrow down the range more, but..."

"No, even just this much is already enough. —Really, thank you very much."

Ayato said that as he bowed his head.

Since they were blindly searching until now, it was great progress even just by having been able to narrow down the position. There was little time remaining, but with this, there might still be a little hope.

"Fufufu, I'm glad I could be of help to you. Well then, I will excuse myself. Actually, if I don't go back already, I will be scolded my manager."

Sylvia floated a relieved expression and once again put the hat on her head.

"Ah, wait a moment, Ryuneheim-san!"

There were many things that he wanted to ask her and he also wanted to properly thank her, but anyway, there was no enough time now.

"If it's fine with you, can you tell me your contact address?"

"Eh...?"

At Ayato's words, Sylvia looked at Ayato with a blank face (in puzzlement).

Ayato could not understand why Sylvia made such a face, but he soon realized.

"...Ah."

Though he asked without thinking, the other party was a world renowned singer. There was no way she could tell her contact address at a moment's notice.

However, after fixedly staring at Ayato's face, Sylvia burst into laughter as she could no longer endure it.

"...Puff! Hahahahaha! It's been a while since I was hit-on, straight like that."

"N-No, it isn't something like hitting on you...!"

"You can call me Sylvie. All my friends call me that."

As Sylvia said so, she took out her portable terminal and turned it towards Ayato's.

Immediately after, her address was sent with a ring-tone.

"It's my private address, so you can contact it any time. Well, I'm a little busy currently, so I don't know whether I will be able to go out right away though."

"Y-Yes..."

Said Sylvia happily to Ayato, who was dumbfounded since it was way too easy.

"To tell you the truth, I been a little interested in you for some time now. By talking directly to you like today, it looks like that interest has gradually become stronger."

Wearing the hat over her eyes again, she lightly tapped her chest as she passed by Ayato's side.

"Then do your best, Ayato-kun. Though it doesn't amount to much, I will also pray for Flora-chan's safety."

- ψ -

After parting with Sylvia, Ayato immediately sent the positional data to Julis and the others.

There was a reaction right away, and Julis, Saya, Eishiro and multiple space windows opened.

『It's good that you figured it out, but... how did you narrow it down here?』

"Errr, that's... sorry, I can't say."

Though Julis' question was natural, I could not break his promise with Sylvia.

『"...Hmm, well it's fine. I'm interested, but now isn't time for that."』

『"...Anyway, it's quite a relief that you were able to narrow down to here."』 Saya chipped in.

『"Right. If it's around here, I know quite a lot, so I think that I can help."』 Eishiro replied.

Julis nodded, following up with, 『"Okay, if we decided so, then it saves the long talk. Without delay, let's—"』 and was interrupted...

『"...But, it would be better if Ayato and Julis don't come."』 Saya said pointedly.

"Eeh?"

『"What did you say?"』

At Saya's words, Ayato and Julis opened their eyes wide, simultaneously.

『"What on earth do you mean by that? Why is it only us who must be excluded?"』

『"...You have to prepare for the final. You won't make it in time if you come with us."』

"That's right, but..."

Certainly, because of the criminal's demand, they were not allowed to withdraw from the Phoenix.

Though they figured out his position, since it was not as if it was settled that they could surely save Flora, they also understood they had to at least abide there.

However—

『"The final is at noon. There is still time!"』

Unexpectedly, Eishiro supported Saya. 『"No, about this, Sasamiya's point is correct. If the criminal is really here, we should move with a minimum number of persons. In the first place, if it turns for the worst that you were found by the criminal, an excuse wouldn't work, right?"』

『"...Besides, no matter how one puts it, it's reckless to challenge the final as you are. You should rest your body, even a little."』

『"Ugh...!"』 Julis uttered helplessly.

"But...!"

Even they understood the reasoning, it was really frustrating of not being able to do anything after coming so far.

『"Ayato-senpai, Julis-san, it's all right! We will definitely save Flora-chan!"』 This time was Kirin's voice.

『"...".』

As expected, if they insisted, Julis can do naught but be silent, as well. After a long silence, she sighed deeply as she gave up. 『"Haah... Understood. Then, we will concentrate on the final."』

"...You're right."

Since Saya and company were obviously right, Ayato and Julis could not be selfish any longer than this. They could no persist in their stubbornness.

『"...It's fine like that. We will save Flora and you will take revenge for us. Like this, everybody will be satisfied."』 As Saya said that, she contentedly nodded.

『"...Ah, Now that you mention it. We were entrusted with that."』

"Honestly, it's kind of burdensome." Ayato jokingly gave a wry smile.

Actually, it would be quite tough to win against Ardi and Rimsi without Ser-Versta.

If they did not work out a solid strategy, they were opponents against whom it might be difficult even to put up a good fight.

『"No problem. If we save Flora, you will become able to use Ser-Versta."』

『"Well, if we make it in time, that is."』

『"...Uh-huh."』

Saya stared at Eishiro who bantered.

Seeing all this, Ayato felt like he was losing strength even though he was in good condition.

Each of them went, with all their power, to what they should do.

If so, then what Ayato should do now was—

Chapter 6 - Each Decisive Battle

『"—No. 7, report on the situation."』 The voice, which contained irritation, got straight to the business.

The man, —Gold Eye, the No. 7 of the Black Cat Institute— briefly responded. "There is no problem."

『"Then, it's fine."』

"What about your side?"

『"They appear to be obedient. It doesn't look like they've contacted the Hunter Guards and there seems to be no movement of the Shadow Star, either. But, aside from those youngsters, there is that vixen at Seidoukan. I don't think that she will stay quiet like this."』

A space window did not open from the portable terminal, which was for the exclusive use of the Black Cat Institute. It was possible to send an image, but this was basically voice only communication. And above all, the other party to whom this portable terminal was connected to was only one person — Le Wolfe Black Institutes's student council president.

『"Actually, I've also heard that around the area, there was a guy who was snooping around, looking for the kid. Well, as you know, the entertainment district(Rotlicht) isn't under my direct control, so I don't know the authenticity of the rumor."』

"..."

Generally, it was thought that everything in the redevelopment area was under management of Le Wolfe Black Institute, but the internal conditions were a little different. This was because there are a substantially large number of various Mafia groups who managed the entertainment district(Rotlicht) and their upper echelon (top brass) consisted of dropout students from each academy and other criminals from outside of Asterisk.

Of course, since even among them, the percentage (ratio) that Le Wolfe graduates occupied was quite high, and many active students also had their names entered as constituent members, its relation with Le Wolfe was strong. Even looking historically, it was also a fact that Le Wolfe's influence was strong.

However, they, and the current student council president, —Dirk Eberwein— were on very bad terms. Therefore the relations, between the entertainment district(Rotlicht) and Le Wolfe, were completely broken now. Since the students of the anti-Dirk faction within the academy were the most active, it might be said that a parts of the Mafia were close to antagonistic towards Dirk.

And; Dirk had tolerated it.

The man did not know the reason and he did not intend to know it, either. That was because it was not his duty.

The man had only to perfectly complete the mission, just as he was ordered.

He could ask for information necessary to carry out his duty, but it was ultimately the master who made judgment.

That's why also, this time, the man asked to his master. "And in case that someone was to get in the way?"

『"We've a hostage on our side. Use that advantage. Even so, if they don't withdraw... I don't mind if you use her and then throw her away."』

The man looked towards the young girl sitting on a corner of the room.

As she was asleep, there was no motion except for an occasional subtle stirring.

『"If I leave that boy as is, he will definitely become an obstacle in the future. I must have him understand, even if just a little, that I'm serious."』

"Understood." The man answered indifferently.

The man's heart was not shaken no matter how cruel the order was.

In the first place, such a thing did not exist.

"..."

『"What's wrong?"』 As if guessing that the atmosphere changed, the voice quizzically asked.

"It looks like someone apparently has come to get in the way."

As the man said that, he cut the communication and looked up at the ceiling.

- ψ -

"...Is it really here?"

Saya looked up at the building in front of her and doubtfully inquired.

"Well, after checking it, the most suspicious place is here. As such, I think it's very likely to be this place." Though Eishiro shrugged his shoulders as if playing dumb, his eyes were serious.

"B-But, Yabuki-senpai really knows a lot of people. I was surprised."

"Gee, it's not that many."

However when he was praised by Kirin, he floated an embarrassed grin as he did not seem to be dissatisfied.

"...In other words, it means that Yabuki usually plays around in this area."

"Ugh...! That's, um, how should I say it..." Eishiro awkwardly averted his gaze.

That said, certainly his popularity^[15] was the real deal.

No matter how much Ayato had narrowed the location down, it still was not as if they already knew the exact location of Flora. It was the first time that both Saya and Kirin has come to the entertainment district(Rotlicht), but many shops were closed in daytime. There were only small casinos, that were open for 24 hours, which crowded with people. Due to that, there was also not that much pedestrian traffic so Saya and Kirin had hard time collecting information, but Eishiro heard interesting stories about this and that from familiar shops easily.

"So, specifically, what kind of suspicious place is this?"

"Uh huh, the building here was a fairly well-known casino, but it seems that it was remodeled just a little while ago."

After hearing his reply, she once again returned her gaze to the building. It was a sizeable five-storey building. Although it faced the main street, it was built in a somewhat secluded place, so it was in the shadow of the neighboring buildings and its surroundings were somber.

Although there was no light now, the outer walls, which were decorated with lights that usually shone brightly in the town during the dazzling night, were comparatively new even to the point where one would not think that a remodeling was necessary.

"They say that, recently, guests seemed to go on rampages, and exterior aside, the interior was awfully messy."

"He~e... It's scary, eh."

"Here, the replacement of tenants is incessant and renovations aren't something unusual. There are also some specialists^[16]. But, it seems that the construction has been halted for these several days."

"...It was halted?"

As Saya frowned, Eishiro chuckled.

"There was apparently some trouble on the side of the specialist which was in charge of it. The particular Mafia group, which was the owner of this, also seemed to be pushing for the renovations, in various ways, so I think that the next specialist will be decided before long."

"...But, till then, it'll be a building in a state of vacancy."

"Well, something like that."

Saya and Kirin simultaneously looked at each other, and silently nodded.

"All right, well then, won't you check inside?"

"B-But, how...?"

What Saya and company had searched, up until now, were mostly abandoned buildings. They did not go as far as to enter on their own — to be exact, the abandoned buildings were targeted by the Hunter Guards, as they wanted them under their control — but this place was not. Regardless of whether it was under renovation, it was a casino so it probably had some sort of security system.

"Hey, hey, it was decided that I'd leave this to you. I'll go check out the surroundings."

Contrary to their expectations Eishiro took out his portable terminal, he connected it to the terminal of the front gate side.

And after he operated the optics keyboard with experienced hands, the door opened with a tepid sound.

"Hey, it's opened." Eishiro spoke casually

"..."

With blank expressions, both Saya and Kirin glared at him.

"It looks like when the insides were damaged, the conventional security system was damaged at that same time. The one which operates now is an un-challenging, simple version. Since it's a makeshift system and the building is under renovation, they probably thought that it was enough with that; so we're lucky."

"No, even if that's the case..."

"...No matter how you put it, your skill is too good."

In response to the suspicious gazes, Eishiro hurriedly looked for excuses.

"N-No, something like this isn't really a big deal, I say! The tool is something I found on the net, and it's something I've also tried several times..."

"..."

Though there was doubt remaining, there was no time to investigate it now. After all, it was nearing noon, if they did not do it quickly, the finals would begin.

"C-Come on, come on, more importantly, we should hurry!"

While saying that to escape questioning, Eishiro entered to the building, and Saya and Kirin had no choice but go along with it.

"Uwah..."

The inside was in a much worse state than they had thought.

As the casino's equipment had already been moved, the spacious hall, with a stairwell connecting to the second floor was empty and lonely, the walls and pillars, now without their luxurious adornings, became naked and were once again only supporting the floor above. For some reason, only the luxurious lighting was deliberately left intact, the shadows of pillars, which stretched on the bare floor, looked eerily creepy.

There were many big holes in the ceiling, but since one would not think that construction was necessary, it was probably something left by the guests who 'went on rampage'. In that case, they could also agree that renovation was necessary.

"For the time being, it looked like there's no one here."

Kirin, while being cautious, looked around at the surroundings.

"Hmm, from the feeling I get, when I take a look at this building, it appears to be a six-layer structure of one floor basement and five floors above ground."

Certainly there was a large set of stairs in the inner part of the hall, and they led to the second floor. The back looked like the downhill stairs. There was also an elevator on the side, but as expected they could not use it in this situation.

"...Above or below?"

"Hmm... either way, if the criminal is here, it'll be dangerous to split; it'd be better to act together."

"If possible, I would also like to do so. I'm bad at fighting after all."

At Kirin's words, Eishiro strongly agreed by saying "yes, yes".

"...If you're a man, you should say that we leave it to you instead." Saya said with scornful eyes.

Eishiro answered without being timid. "It's said the right person in the right place. Besides, I'm also doing my best for once, you know?"

"Doing your best?"

"I can't help you, but then I should just call someone useful. Well, I don't know if he'll come, since I can only request— wait... What's that!?"

Shifting their attention to Eishiro's voice, something was wriggling as if gushing forth in the shadow of a pillar.

"Is that... a person?"

While unsheathing the carp mouth^[17] of Senbakiri, Kirin quizzically muttered.

"...Mana is gathering around there. It's probably a setting type ability."

In other words, it would be a trap or defense device.

As Kirin said, it seemed to have a human shape, but the "shape" was only just close (in shape). The whole body was pitch-black, as if a shadow was cut out and had no ruggedness whatsoever, and the distinction of which was the front and the back could not be grasped. Both hands were pointed out like a sharp horn, and even if it was unpleasant, one could guess what kind of purpose it had. If compelled to say, was it certain it was a "person's shadow"?

"At the very least, there's no doubt that we're right on the mark. Isn't it all right?"

Eishiro who said that had already withdrawn to a position near the wall. It looked like he really intended to leave it all to Saya and Kirin.

The shadow, which had been doing nothing but standing stock still, suddenly attacked Kirin.

But, Kirin, without panicking, slew it with one stroke of her sword. The shadow which received Senbakiri's blow vanished like mist just as if it were sand blown by the wind.

Although its movements were not that fast, the attack was simple, easy to read and above all it was too much fragile (brittle). Frankly, it was not at the level of being Saya's or Kirin's opponent.

"What, it isn't that big a deal. Even I can manage just this much..."

The expression of Eishiro who was comfortably saying such things stiffened in middle of sentence.

This was because shadows arose once again from the shadows of the pillars. And this time, it was not just one or two.

"This... I wonder how many there are?"

"...Who knows?"

The shadows which gushed forth from here and there in the shadows were about 50 in number when only assessed roughly. Moreover, they were still increasing.

"Kuh...!"

The shadows attacked Saya and company one after another.

As Saya activated her hand gun type Lux in an instant, she defeated five shadows almost simultaneously by using quick shots.

"T-This is an ability of autonomy type! No matter how you put it, it's impossible to control all of these simultaneously!"

From the words of Eishiro, who shouted while running around the hall while trying to escape, Saya recalled a story she heard from Ayato.

A person with ability called Cyrus who once fought against Ayato seemed to have the power to control more than one hundred puppets, but in actuality it was about ten puppets that he could control simultaneously.

However, such uniformity could not be observed at all in those shadows' movements.

"Autonomous type ability means that the most they can do, is to only execute a simple order! The criminal probably commanded them with something like 'eliminate the intruder!'"

"...I see. In that case, there is no real need to keep fighting them."

Both Saya and Kirin still had damage from the semifinal. Especially Kirin, who had not yet recovered from the injury of her right leg, as for Saya, she had yet to fully recover her Prana. Even though their opponents were small fries, their stamina would not last if they were to take on all those shadows.

"...Kirin. I'm sorry, but I will rely on you for a little while."

"Roger!"

They were physically and mentally harmonized. Kirin who immediately understood Saya's intention took one step forward and changed her stance in order to protect Saya.

After Saya put away the hand guns, she activated a huge Lux with a large gun barrel.

Most of the armaments on hand had received so much damage during the semifinal that maintenance was required, but as for this, the damage was still relatively shallow (light).

"Lux Type 39 Laser Canon Wolfdora — sweep"

When Saya squeezed the trigger, a torrent of light gushed out. A large amount of Prana was consumed and everything before her eyes turned dark for an instant, but she shook her head slightly and endured.

The pillar of light mowed down the shadows with a roaring sound, when silence returned once again to the hall, nobody aside from Saya was remaining standing.

"Phew..."

"Saya-san, are you all right...?"

"...No problem."

Although she pretended to be all right as she muttered that to the anxious Kirin, she had not recovered as much Prana she'd thought. After the semifinal, since she had run about since yesterday to until now, with almost no rest, one could say that it was natural; This might be kind of bad.

Aside from the small armaments like hand guns, Saya's heavy armaments were all of the Lobos transition system, as such one shot from one of her heavy armaments consumed as much Prana as meteor arts.

(At this rate, I can only shoot about two or three times. Huh...)

Although, in truth, she wanted to beat the criminal who kidnapped Flora into a pulp, it might be better to avoid battle as much as possible in this state. If the criminal obediently handed over Flora, it would be good. Of course, depending on the situation, it could not be helped if they had to fight, but—

"Hey, hey, you two! It looks like it's still early to relax!"

Eishiro suddenly raised his face with a sharp voice.

"Eh, again...!?"

Shadows in likeness of people began to arise again from the pillars' shadows.

The number was the same as earlier— no maybe even more than that.

"Th-There is no end to this...!"

Slight impatience could also be felt in Kirin's voice.

Now that it came to this, they could only force their way through, but there were a swarm of shadows on the other side of the stairs. Though they would have no problem if they were in perfect condition, for the current Saya and Kirin, there was a slight uneasiness remaining towards the breakthrough.

Even so, it was much better than continuing a war of attrition.

"...Kirin, it's a little unreasonable, but we will break through."

"Yes... we have no choice."

It looked like Kirin was thinking the same thing. They nodded at each other.

Just before the shadows surged like an avalanche and were about to attack the two girls.

"Tch! Geez, what are you guys doing!"

A violent shock ran from the side and blew up the shadows altogether.

"Oooh, you finally arrive, huh! I was waiting for you!"

In contrast with the dumbfounded two girls, only Eishiro went out to meet that person while clapping his hands.

"...Lester MacPhail ... Why are you here?"

Right. It was indeed Seidoukan Academy rank #9, Lester MacPhail who appeared with a sullen face.

"I was forcibly called by that bastard Yabuki! Otherwise, why would I expressly come to such a place?"

He shouted with the huge Halberd^[18] type Lux in his hand.

"Oh dear! "Forcibly" is saying too much. I just intended to ask a request though."

"Negotiating while grasping hold of someone's weakness is what a bastard like you calls a request? Shouldn't you rather say blackmail?"

I see. It was like Eishiro to do such a thing.

That said, it did not change the fact that they were saved. The shadows charged forth anew, and most of them had turned towards the new intruder. They did not let this chance slip.

"...MacPhail, we leave the rest to you." Saya said quickly, and took off shamelessly.

"S-Sorry! Please!" Kirin, who was honestly sorry, politely bowed.

After that, they cut into the swarm of shadows.

"Huh!? H-Hey, wait a minute!"

Though Lester's perplexed voice flew from behind, there was no time to wait.

As Saya once again activated the two hand gun type Lux, she asked so to Kirin beside her while opening a path. "And, Kirin... above or below, which is it?"

"Which do you think it is, Saya-san?" Similarly, while swinging Senbakiri right and left, Kirin returned the question.

"...Below."

There was no reason. It was intuition.

"Me, too." While chuckling, Kirin answered with that.

Back on the other side.

"Well then, MacPhail. Do your best." Eishiro, while leaving those words, ran off somewhere.

Also, Saya and Kirin disappeared on the other side of the shadows...

Remaining in the hall were only Lester and the countless shadows.

The beginning of how it came to this was last night. When he wondered why he was suddenly contacted by Eishiro, he was allowed to help out with no chance to refuse^[19].

It no longer mattered where Eishiro had learned his secret.

Though briefly, he was also told about the situation; even Lester could not stand a coward who tried to achieve their goals by kidnapping a small child.

The pent-up anger, from being eliminated in the third round of the Phoenix, had also piled up.

"...Even so..."

The shadows attacked Lester, who was looking downwards, and muttered to himself.

As Lester sent them flying with one swing of his halberd, he shouted in a loud voice to display his foul mood.

"Why am I the only one made to play such a role?"

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As Ayato checked the time, he called out to Julis who was sitting on the sofa of the waiting room with her eyes closed. "It's already time, Julis."

"...I see" As Julis briefly answered, she stood up, stretching herself out greatly.

"Good grief, in the end, there was no call from Saya and the others."

"..."

Since they did not know the situation over there, they could not contact them.

And the fact that they themselves were not yet contacted, it meant that it was probably that sort of situation.

"Fufufu, don't make such a face, Ayato. Come on, let's go."

However with a calm look, Julis floated a wry smile and opened the door of the waiting room.

How many times had he already walked down the passage heading to the stage like this with her? At very least, he felt like it had been a very long time that had passed here since the first time when they had to fight in the first round. Even though it was only two weeks ago.

Julis suddenly muttered,

"—Hey, Ayato. It's a good thing to have reliable comrades."

"Eh?"

Ayato stopped walking at the unexpected words.

Julis likewise stopped and continued as if speaking to herself.

"You know, Ayato. Flora and everyone in my country are important to me more than anything. That's why I swore that I will do anything for them, and I thought it was fine as long as everyone is alright. But, when I think about it now, I was just shutting myself off from the world. —Ayato, I understood it well. Um... After having you as p-partner."

"Julis..."

"I can still make more important comrades like everyone in my country. Like Saya and Kirin."

While looking straight at Ayato's eyes, Julis smiled as she felt embarrassed.

"Now, I can honestly believe in them. So, don't worry. I'm all right."

"I see... Yes. Then well..."

Ayato and Julis who began to walk again stood side-by-side in front of the stage.

Julis who took a small breath while strongly clenching her fists, and went through the gate.

『"Now, player Amagiri Ayato and player Julis-Alexia van Riessfeld of Seidoukan Academy also make their entrance from the east gate! It's finally the last match in this Phoenix where various fights have been unfolding for a period of two weeks! It's the final!"』

『"Gee, I can't wait."』

A boisterous dance of dazzling lights.

While advancing within it, Julis muttered;

"It's really strange. Even though we're in a situation such as this, —now— I want to win this match so much that it's unbearable (I'm dying to win this match)."

"Yes, me too."

After he replied with that, Julis joyfully nodded.

"Ok, then, both you and I shall try to be as greedy as possible. Let's obtain everything we desire."

"Without losing anything."

Ayato and Julis stared at the two autonomous type puppets before them.

One of the other duo, the owner of a large build that was as if it was piercing the heavens, heartily laughed.

"Fuhahahahahaha! We can finally face each other, Amagiri Ayato! I have been eagerly waiting for this time!"

"Haa..."

"Master has been always talking about you, I am expecting so very much of you! By all means, give me the excitement which exceeds what Sasamiya Saya and Toudou Kirin gave me!"

While straightly tracing the sword cut carved from his forehead to his cheeks, Ardi shook his large build.

"Unfortunately, I can't guarantee it..."

Although slightly nervous at that high tension, Ayato answered with a serious expression.

"But, this match — I will win it. Absolutely."

"Fufufu! Those words are enough!"

As Ardi stared at Ayato's eyes, he happily nodded for some reason.

"And we only hope that, like those girls, you are humans suitable for giving you our respect. And..."

"—It's before the match, and yet you already talk too much, you blockhead! Listen, in the first place, since you have a body with bad Mana consumption (fuel-inefficient body), at least respect yourself. If possible, if you could never again open your mouth, it will help me very much."

Rimsi who was standing beside Ardi put a damper on him in a cold tone.

"Mmm... But you have been obviously talking more than me, though."

"Do you not understand when I say to stop your impudent talk?"

Seeing a huge gun type Lux appearing in Rimsi's hand, Ardi finally shut his mouth.

"...I already knew it, but they are really unusual puppets. Eh." While observing their exchanges, Julis muttered, somewhat amazed.

"Hahaha... But, only a little, I think that I'm glad that our opponents in the finals are them."

"Hou, Why?"

"Because we can confront them without hesitation."

For example, judging from their strength, Irene or the twins of World Dragon might also have reached the finals, but it would not probably have been like this with them.

"Well, you're right on the point wherein they are worthy opponents"

Julis activated Aspera Spina while saying so.

As Ayato also activated a blade type Lux, the live reporter and the commentator greatly rustled.

『"Oooh, as expected it looks like player Amagiri won't use Ser-Versta in this final, either!"』

『"If you normally think about it, rather than not using it, may it not be that he can't use it? the Ogre Luxes... especially that Ser-Versta is an item known to be hard to please, so there might be some trouble."』

『"According to some rumors, there are talks that an urgent freezing process was applied (requested), but... oops, while we were speaking, the start time approached! Come on, everyone, whether you like it or not, now this is the last match of the Phoenix! Which pair will stand at the top?"』

While ignoring the voice of the excited live reporter, they focused.

The match start was exactly at noon.

Still three, two, one—

"Phoenix Final, Battle start!" The school badges on their chest's announced the last signal.

At the same time, Ayato released his power and headed straight towards Ardi.

—With Julis.

"Hohou~u!"

『"Mmm! Is this a strategy of Amagiri-Riessfeld pair where they will beat player Ardi first with the two of them?"』

『"It's standard strategy to aim at either one of the opponents, but for player Riessfeld, who should be in the back, going forward is a little unusual."』

Right. When fighting against those two, the most troublesome thing was that fusion state which overwhelmed Saya and Kirin.

In that case, they should simply defeat either one of them before that.

Considering only from the aspect of defensive power, it was probably better to aim at Rimsi first, but that said, Rimsi had that flight unit. If she were to escape into the air, there would be no way to have a two-on-one fight.

"Let's go, Julis!"

"Yes!"

Ayato immediately adjusted his breathing and set up his sword.

Without grudge.

"Amagiri Bright Dragon Style Sword Intermediate Technique — <Nine-fanged Long Sword>"

Nine consecutive attacks which combined five thrusts and four kinds of slashes.

It was a technique of the highest difficulty even among the Intermediate Techniques, but all of that was prevented before the defensive barrier which Ardi instantly deployed.

"Fuhahahaha! Unfortunately, I already have the data of that technique!"

Ardi proudly declared so.

"...Looks like it."

"Hmm?"

Even so, to Ayato who showed a composed smile, Ardi leaked a voice as he was puzzled for an instant.

Certainly, he had also happened to use this technique once when he fought against Cyrus' puppets. Since they were puppets which Ernesta made, it would not be strange for her to have gotten the data at that time.

They took that into account.

"Bloom proudly — Dancing nine-spirering-flower(Primrose)!"

Immediately after, an intense heat rose behind Ayato.

Ardi's defensive barrier was, so to speak, something like a shield, and the range in which it was able to defend was limited.

Even so, the speed with which it could be instantly deployed and the area of the deployment range covering 360° established it as an absolute defense.

But, when it came to simultaneous attacks from many directions, it would be difficult to defend with just the defensive barrier.

"Nuuuuuuuuuuuuuh!"

Ardi shook off the flame flowers which came attacking from all directions with his huge hammer. Though they were activated in a much shorter distance than usual, there was not even a slight disturbance in Julis' control.

"Amagiri Bright Dragon Style First Sword Fighting Skill — <Twin Water Dragons>"

At that chance, Ayato stepped forward further and let out the next technique.

The aim was of course the school badge on the chest.

—However.

"To ignore me like that, you are quite cheeky."

Just before that, a swelling torrent of light attacked Ayato and Julis from the side.

It was the built-in weapon which Rimsi's left arm changed into —
Ruinsharif.

"...No way, there is no way we would ignore you."

However, before it hit directly, Ayato led Julis by the hand and dodged it, barely.

"We're properly cautious."

"Wha...!"

Rimsi opened her eyes wide, atypically, in surprise.

She was probably thinking it was a perfect timing.

Actually, if it was the usual Ayato, he would have not been able to dodge it.

But, the current Ayato's perception expanded to the utmost limit, so he could grasp the information of the Battle-Stage with a bird's eye view.

It was a technique called Field (state) of "Cognition" in Amagiri Bright Dragon Style.

This technique originally displayed it's maximum (greatest) effect when in a situation of one-on-many fight, so it was not very useful in a situation of one-on-one fight. It was only tiring.

However, Julis applied this and devised a bold strategy.

Create a two-on-one situation in a tag battle and quickly defeat one opponent was, as the commentator said, standard strategy among standard strategies, but there was a suitable risk that came along with it. It was natural since the other opponent would become completely free. You might say that he could aim from the side as much as he liked.

Ayato, being able to grasp overall the movements, in the state of "cognition" meant that he knew not only Ardi's and Rimsi's movements, but also Julis' as well. If so, then to take Rimsi by surprise, like now; if she was close to Ayato it was possible for him to evade by interfering with her movements.

Of course, it was in the end a theory; so even with Ayato's reaction speed, it would be fairly limited. Originally there was nothing they could do against the attacks which Ayato could not deal with (for example, the state of "cognition" was inefficient against Kirin's "Conjoined Cranes"). Above all, if

Julis did not trust Ayato from the bottom of her heart, they would not have been able to do it at all.

(However, certainly we can considerably reduce the risk of the two-on-one fight like this...!)

Thinking about Ardi's and Rimsi's learning speed, they could not keep this up for much longer; in short, they should settle the match before that.

"Ayato, we will press him!"

"Roger!"

Julis was completely concentrated on Ardi as the opponent.

While fighting side by side at a distance in which their bodies could collide, it was precisely because Ayato had the state of "cognition" that they did not collide.

"Bloom proudly — Flaming Crimson Decapitator(Livingstone Daisy)!"

Countless flames blew up from the ground and chakrams of flame appeared as if swirling.

That they were slightly smaller than usual was probably because Julis gave priority to the number of them over their individual power. The crimson chakrams, which numbered were more than twenty, attacked Ardi.

"Kuh!"

It seemed that Rimsi's supporting fire was not aimed at Ayato and Julis, but at the chakrams. As expected, her correction was quick^[20].

Although the chakrams were shot down one after another by the light bullets which Rimsi fired, there was also no way that she could shoot all of them.

"Amagiri Bright Dragon Style, Intermediate Technique — <Ten Linked Thistles>."

From that place, Ayato rotated and put the force of his whole body into two consecutive strikes.

"Gunuuuuuuuuuuuh!"

The tip of his sword was repelled by the defensive barrier close to the school badge, but while that happened, several chakrams shallowly cut Ardi's armor.

After that, as Ayato set up his stance again — he promptly turned around and shortened the distance to Rimsi in one movement.

"—!?"

Rimsi, who was currently devoting herself to Ardi's support, managed to immediately change her aim over to Ayato; unfortunately Ayato was a step quicker.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Dodging the barrage scattered to restrain him (by diverting his attention), Ayato delivered a flash from a low position.

He bisected the gun which Rimsi had on her right hand, and when he was about to release another strike, a wall of light suddenly appeared and stood in his way. It was Ardi's defensive barrier.

Though Ayato dodged it as he stepped to the side, at that time, Rimsi released the flight unit and flew to the sky.

But again, this was expected.

"Fufufu, I was waiting for this moment...!"

They noticed it when watching their match against Saya and Kirin, but if Ardi's defensive barrier was close to him, the deployment speed was faster. If he used it to protect another person who was in a distant place like now, a time lag would occur before he would be able to re-deploy the next barrier no matter what.

"Come out — Glorious Rending Flame Claw Flower(Gloriosa)!"

At the same time as Julis swung Aspera Spina downward, a magic circle materialized on the ground. A huge flame claw blew up and crushed the now defenseless Ardi.

"Gunuuuuuuuuuuuh! This much is nothing!"

But, surprisingly (As surprising as it may seem) Ardi swung his hammer and blew off the flames, thereby breaking out of Julis' trap with brute force.

"Buuuh...!"

Although there were burn marks on his armor, here and there, it did not seem to be serious damage.

"Kuh, what armor...!"

After clicking her tongue in vexation, Julis retreated to Ayato again.

"We have to go back to square one, huh."

"That said, they aren't opponents who will fall for the same trick twice."

While moving his eyes as he adjusting his breathing, Ardi and Rimsi took their distance as well. It looked like they were thinking the same thing.

"Honestly, it's really painful that our attack just now was not enough to decide this match. Though I think that we can still keep this coordination up for a while..."

Now that he could not use Ser-Versta, Ayato and Julis had almost no way to pierce that defensive barrier. They might somehow manage with Julis's strongest firepower, but Ardi and Rimsi would not be so easygoing as to let her prepare it.

"Even the sword skills which Kirin used were not useful? That's, leading the defensive barrier..."

"That's a skill which could be done precisely because Kirin-chan... or should I say, the Toudou Style is the school which excels in it. That said, even I can do something like that, but it will be difficult to reproduce it at that level; besides I don't think it will work on Ardi who has already experienced it once."

After all, in the second half of the semifinal, he was already able to deal with Kirin's attacks.

"In that case, the only choice we have now is to overwhelm him with the number of attacks. Huh..."

Julis muttered that with her face expressing "it can't be helped".

—And.

"Fuhahahahahaha! Splendid! It's really splendid! It was a combination which surpassed my expectations, Amagiri Ayato! And Julis-Alexia van Riessfeld!"

Ardi's noisy laughter resounded throughout the stage.

"Yesterday more than the day before yesterday, today more than yesterday, the self-confidence that we have certainly developed. Though, it seems like you are ahead of us. In that case, we have no choice but to quickly play our trump card."

At those words, the entire audience got excited.

『"Oooh, it came, it came, that declaration from player Ardi! Does that mean that we will finally see that fusion again?"』

Though the live reporter was also really excited, it was not the same for Ayato and Julis.

"No, well, originally, I intended to do so from the beginning, but as usual, Rimsi did not allow it."

"...Naturally. We have repetitively been told by Master not to use it carelessly, after all."

Rimsi who turned a cold gaze towards Ardi openly breathed a great sigh.

"However, to be certain we will win against you, it looks like I can't do anything but agree to do so. It's extremely unpleasant though."

"...We don't intend to let you do so easily." Ayato, while saying that, adjusted his stance again.

Though Ardi and Rimsi said that, in a matter of fact fashion, their current power, and that of Ayato and Julis, could be said to be on par, even if looking at it in a favorable light. It looked like they were overwhelmed precisely because they got caught up in Julis' strategy, but it was obvious that they would recover if the battle was dragged on.

"I'm sure that even you know, but there is a big opening in the moment of preparation for the union. It isn't like us to overlook it."

At Julis' words, Ayato greatly nodded inwardly.

It was understandable that Saya and Kirin were wary since it was the first time that it was done before their eyes, but Ayato and Julis already knew what it looked like. They would not hesitate.

"You are right. Certainly that requires a little time, and if it is you, you will probably not have any trouble in defeating us with that chance. However — do you think our Master did not prepare some sort of measures to deal with that?"

As Rimsi said that, she stretched (held out) her left hand; Ruinsharif held right above.

"Ruinsharif, mode "Wolkenwurf" — Maximum output."

Then, Ruinsharif's shape further changed. It was now just like huge cannon.

"I won't let you do...!"

Though Ayato promptly jumped out, a huge light bullet was shot from Ruinsharif earlier than he could reach them. The bullet's speed was surprisingly slow and at the moment one thought that it completely unmoving in the air—

"Julis, step back!"

It suddenly exploded and scattered countless small light bullets.

He tried to somehow reach Rimsi while dodging the light bullets which poured down as if they were rain, but it was not easy even with the state of "cognition".

"ACM unit, first external armor, various Luxes purge... Limit control transfer"

Meanwhile, Rimsi and Ardi were steadily advancing the progression of their union.

"Eeih, now that it came to this—!"

Ayato plunged into the rain of light bullets prepared to sustain some damage. No matter how high the bullet's original power was, if they were finely separated to this extent, he should be able to pull through by investing as much Prana in defense as possible.

"Guh...!"

A shock much stronger than he expected struck Ayato's body, but he endured it and charged through in one movement.

"With this—!"

"...It's too bad, Amagiri Ayato."

Passing by Rimsi, Ayato swung his sword with all his might.

It accurately cut off the school badge on Rimsi's chest — but.

"Fuhahahaha! It looks like you were a step too slow!"

It was after the unit which separated from Rimsi had already united with Ardi.

"Camilla Pareto, badge broken"

At the same time, the school badge announced Rimsi's defeat. It was Camilla's name, because Rimsi participated in this Phoenix as her substitute — in other words, it was because she was using Camilla's school badge.

"Union completed!"

As Ardi who further expanded his large build said that and swung his hammer once, by just by doing that, a wind strong enough to blow a person away, was created.

"Good grief... Well then, I leave the rest to you."

"Yea! Good work!"

Rimsi stepped back with slow steps and Ardi stepped forward in her stead.

"Well, let's begin the second round!"

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As Kirin and Saya descended underground, they immediately ran into a huge door. It did not have an electronic lock, but was a normal door which could be opened by hand.

Since Saya and Kirin had fought so many shadows upstairs, if the criminal was here, they should have already surmised that Kirin and Saya had invaded. So now, they did not intend to move stealthily, but the other party

had a hostage. As such, It was probably wise for both of them to be prepared for if something happens.

"Saya-san, I'm going first."

Even though she had an injured leg, it was Kirin's role to be the vanguard.

Saya should stand back and watch the situation until she could grasp it and then move only if necessary.

"...Understood."

Seeing that Saya nodded, Kirin slowly opened the door.

In there, a hall was spread out like on the above floor. However, unlike the first floor which had an open ceiling, the ceiling was not too high and there were also a lot more pillars.

Lighting in the form of lanterns was hung all over the place, but since the lights, which could be considered as the main lighting, was not switched on, overall it gave a gloomy impression. However there were still a few lights, some that were much brighter than others in places, and a small girl was illuminated by one of them. The girl's feet and hands were bound, and she wearily hung her head in as she leaned on the pillar.

「フローちゃん！」

いいえいいえ、他よ、ちもずい、と明るい照明があい、その「いいえ」な女の子が照らされていた。
女の子は手紙を握束を、柱に寄りかかるような姿勢で、うたた寝をたれていて。



"Flora-chan."

When Kirin called out to her, the girl startled raised her face.

"Nnnnnh!"

Though one could not know what she was saying, as a gag had been forced in her mouth, she repeatedly shook her head greatly.

At that moment, Kirin suddenly felt bloodlust and leapt back a large distance.

A huge black thorn flew out from the shadow of the pillar a moment later, but it pierced the empty space where Kirin had been standing just a second ago. In appearance, it looked most like a thorn from a sea urchin.

Moments later, similar thorns flew out from other shadows, aimed at Kirin as well.

"Tch...!"

Kirin dodged those attacks while bearing the pain running through her leg, but all of them were dangerous. After all, she could not grasp at all from where they would fly out from.

(Be it these thorns or the shadows on the first floor, as expected, it's someone with the ability to use "shadows" as weapons...!)

Since there were countless lights placed in the hall, any one object produced multiple shadows. She had to look out for not only the floor, but also the walls, the ceiling and all four directions. In other words, the adversary was able to display his ability to its full potential in this place.

However, it's as if he actually controlled the shadows; he probably collected Mana on the shadow image's core.

"—I see, Toudou Kirin, huh. A very big shot came over."

Before long, exactly when the attacks stopped, one man came out from the pillar against which Flora was leaned. It looked as if he oozed out from the darkness, and he had cold, inhuman air which would make one shiver. His voice also seemed cold, just like something without emotion.

"...Are you the kidnapper?"

The man, without answering Kirin's question slightly shook his finger. As if responding to it, a thorn which extended from Flora's shadow thrust towards her throat.

"If you get in my way, I can't guarantee this girl's life."

"N-No way...! Please stop it already! Even if you do such a thing, you'll just put yourself at a disadvantage!"

For example — Kirin was also frightening just to imagine it, but if by chance he was to do such a thing, she would lose all self-restraint. The man's desire would not be achieved, but his crime would just become more severe.

However, the man looked at Kirin with his eyes like stones without warmth.

"I will just tell you one thing. It doesn't matter what will happen to me."

Kirin shuddered at those words.

It was because she understood that he was serious.

If Kirin did not obey, this man would pull it off without hesitation.

"First of all, throw away your weapon."

"...Kuh."

Since she understood it, Kirin had no other choice but thrust it aside.

Helplessly, she slowly put Senbakiri on the floor.

—However.

At that moment, "Kirin! Flora!" Saya's voice sharply resounded in the hall.

At the same time the thorn, which was thrust at Flora's throat, was shot out, and became dust that disappeared.

In addition, with a single dull gunshot sound, before long, the hall was filled with dazzling light.

(A flare bomb—!)

That strong light temporarily wiped out any other current shadows, and created a new shadows instead. But, that meant that it changed from where the opponent's attack could come.

After Kirin picked up Senbakiri, she ran to Flora with all her power.

The pain on her leg no longer mattered. She did not even mind that it tore and the wound got worse.

The man slightly knitted his eyebrows and shook his finger. Mana wriggled, and a new thorn was created from Flora's shadow.

"I won't let you do that!"

Kirin's sword slash cut off that thorn with little room to spare, and she held Flora while rolling over.

As support, light bullets were continuously shot towards the man from the direction of the entrance of the hall.

"This shooting... Sasamiya Saya, huh."

The man easily dodged them, but it was enough to give time for Kirin.

Still holding Flora, immediately, she was returning to the entrance — On the way, her right leg reached its limit.

"Kuah...!"

Desperately enduring so she did not to fall down, she relieved herself of guarding Flora while gritting her teeth in pain.

"Kirin!"

"I-I'm all right! More importantly, take Flora!"

As Kirin removed the gag at last, Flora said with a face ready to cry at any moment.

"T-Toudou-sama! Thank you!"

"No, more importantly, head quickly to that door...!"

She made a smile so she did not worry Flora and strongly pushed her back.

Meanwhile, thorns attacked from the shadows in the surroundings, but they were all repelled by Saya's light bullets.

"Yes!"

Wiping her tears while muttering, Flora began to run. Even though a child, she was a Starpulse Generation. She soon reached the entrance.

After watching her back, Kirin turned to face the man.

"Now, then... what will you do?"

"As if you need to ask. I will eliminate you guys and take the girl back."

It looked like he did not feel like backing down.

A black-lacquered blade slipped out from the man's arm. It was not a Lux, but a real sword. Though it was about the size of a dagger, it seemed to have been equipped directly in the arm. It probably hated that his hands were closed.

"In that case, even if it costs me my life, I can't let you pass here."

Kirin who said that also got in a stance with Senbakiri.

Guessing from his attack patterns so far, there were several restrictions to the man's ability.

First, his shadows could not be subject to quite complicated movements. If this was possible, Kirin would have already been skewered long ago.

And at the same time it let one guess another restriction. Perhaps, the man's ability could not activate if it was not a situation which he had a visual of the targets shadows. Since the shadows on the upper floor were setting-type ability, it would be all right as long as he could see them when setting them up.

(In other words, this ability specialized in surprise attacks and assassination...)

When used in that manner, it was an extremely frightening ability, but when faced with a direct confrontation, it was another issue. Surprise attacks from a blind spot would be troublesome, but fortunately, now Kirin had Saya's support. As long as there was Saya's shooting skill, there was no need to be any more afraid.

—However, Kirin immediately realized that it was a naive (optimistic) thought.

"Kuh...!"

Kirin's Senbakiri blocked the man's slash. It was nevertheless a heavy blow which precisely aimed at the vitals.

Though Kirin parried it, the man immediately rebuilt his stance and returned a sharp thrust.

Although Kirin who thought that she had handled it well as she dodged it by jumping aside, her right leg could not follow. The black-lacquered blade grazed her left arm, and the man's knee hammered into her abdomen in a place that caused her movements to become dull.

"—!"

Though she almost collapsed on the floor unintentionally, she could not do it.

Kirin mustered her power and leapt back greatly taking a distance.

A thorn from a shadow attacked her as it aimed at where she was to land, but it was eliminated by Saya.

(...Strong)

She could by no means afford to underestimate him. There was also the handicap of her injured foot.

However, even if Kirin was in perfect condition, would she really be able to defeat this man...?

In terms of sword skills, Kirin was above him, but she was completely losing in Taijutsu. Moreover, there was no hesitation at all in his attacks. An art of combat with sole purpose of killing the opponent.

Since Saya must protect Flora, she probably had her hands full by just dealing with the man's ability.

If Kirin used "Conjoined Cranes", she might be able to defeat him; but it would be difficult considering the condition of her foot.

(It's all or nothing... No, but if I fail...)

But, the man did not give her room to think.

As he shortened the distance with a surprisingly quiet run, he let out sharp, consecutive attacks.

Throat, chest, temple, abdomen.

If any of his attacks which contained blade, fists and kicks were to hit her, the fight would be settled as these attacks aimed only at her vitals.

"—It's the end"

"Eh?"

The man suddenly muttered and his figure disappeared from Kirin's eyes.

At that moment, Kirin noticed that she had been maneuvered into a trap.

Before her eyes, a wall. It was the light behind her that caused Kirin's shadow to be projected there.

(Like this, my body will get in the way and Saya-san won't be able to shoot...!)

"Kirin, dodge!"

Though she turned her body as she heard Saya's voice, she was slightly late.

A thorn which extended from the shadow pierced Kirin's flank.

"Aaaaaaaaah!"

To the pain which felt like a lump of burning iron was pushed (in), a scream was unconsciously leaked.

Her clothes were quickly dyed in red and she was rapidly losing strength.

Though she almost dropped Senbakiri, she bit her lips and endured it somehow, and cut off the thorn with her trembling hand.

But, it was the best she could do, and she forcibly stopped her body which almost fell down by using Senbakiri as support.

"It's a vital point. You are no longer able to fight with that bleeding. She will lose her life if you don't treat it quickly."

The man indifferently declared and calmly advanced.

"—Not, yet."

But, Kirin stood so as to block his way with unsteady steps.

"What can you do with your body in that state?"

There was neither scorn nor self-conceit in the man's voice. He was just telling the fact.

Right, it was a fact.

Kirin was probably not able to wield her sword anymore.

"Do you want to try, and see...?"

Then, it must be after the next strike she would give up.

As Kirin forcibly fixed her breathing, she sheathed Senbakiri and took a stance.

"A quick draw^[21], huh...?"

The man also narrowed his eyes as he was cautious.

He must not be careless for even an instant here.

"Toudou Style, art of sword drawing — "Folding Feather""

Muttering so, Kirin unsheathed Senbakiri.

—At least, the man probably thought it would be like that.

"What...?"

To the man's pupils which were like stones, surprised surfaced for the first time.

It was because Kirin had not even drawn out Senbakiri yet after all.



However, the man's body had reflexively moved so as to deal with her illusionary slash.

From Kirin's perspective now, it was similar to a figure full of openings.

This time for real, Senbakiri ran through its scabbard and drew a sword slash.

The point of the sword splendidly cut off the tendons of both arms of the man.

"Impossible..."

The Toudou Style's secret technique is "Conjoined Cranes" — in other words, an unending chain of continuous attacks.

However, its essence is to trick the opponent by use of gaze, breathing, and preliminary movements or gestures.

Making use of that was the Toudou Style, Art of Sword Drawing — it was a sword of illusion which made it seem like it was drawn out even though it was not. This was the first time that Kirin had succeeded in doing it in actual combat though.

"...!"

But, Kirin who reached her limit staggered and fell to her knees, drained.

On the other hand, the man was still standing in front her, languidly hanging both of his arms.

"It's a great technique, but you've reached your limit. I can still..."

"—No, it's enough."

Before the man finished speaking, a whirlpool of light swallowed his body.

"—!"

Wolfdora's shot, which Saya fired, sent the man flying into the wall, and the wall which received it could not take it and raggedly crumbled down. Just like that, the man's body had been swallowed in the collapsed debris.

Of course, there was no way that Saya would have overlooked such an opening. If the line of fire was cleared because Kirin squatted down, the

only thing she had to do was to leave the rest up to her. Right, she trusted her.

"Kirin, pull yourself together!"

"Toudou-sama! Toudou-sama!"

While hearing the voices Saya and Flora who rushed over, Kirin thought of Ayato and Julis as her consciousness faded.

(That's right... the Senpais' match, I wonder how it's going...)

- ψ -

—Overwhelming.

It was a strength that could not be expressed as anything other than that.

"Fuhahahahahaha! What's the matter, Amagiri Ayato?"

While dodging Ardi's hammer by a hair's breadth, Ayato had sneaked around to his blind spot and swung his sword.

Only to have it stopped by the defensive barrier as if it was natural that it did not reach.

In addition, another barrier forcibly sent Ayato flying, and Ardi's hammer attacked him with a strike on his side as his body floated in the air. As Ayato extended his arm and thrust his sword into the ground, he changed his trajectory by using it as a pivot point and somehow dodged the blow.

"Bloom proudly — Dancing nine-spirering-flower(Primrose)!"

At the same time, Julis' fireballs attacked Ardi, but they were also stopped by multiple defensive barriers.

"Eeih, what on earth is happening? No matter how you put it, he (it) has become too strong!"

"Really, I agree...!"

As Ayato created some distance and congregated with Julis, he nodded while smiling wryly.

Though they had thought that since the time they watched the semifinal's match, Ardi's strength after the union was abnormal.

From basic specs such as power and speed up to the power of the weapons armaments, roughly all of the abilities which could be considered had improved. Even if Rimsi gave all her power to Ardi, it should be impossible to be strengthened like this.

Moreover, what was frightening was that that strength was completely different even in comparison to what he showed in the semifinal.

"Even when he fought against Saya and Kirin, he did not deploy multiple defensive barriers!"

This was no longer an issue at the level of whether his learning ability was high.

It was fortunate for Ayato and Julis that Ardi was not assertively attacking. It looked like Ardi wanted to enjoy this battle for as long time as much as possible.

"Fuhahahaha! Splendid! So, this is what it means when power boils! And the current me is able to use this power much more efficiently than before! What delight! What excitement! This is what was given by Master, my true power!"

"True power...?"

At these words, Ayato suddenly thought of one possibility.

"Hey, Julis... If the current Ardi thinks that those are his original specs, how is it (what do you think)?"

If the purpose of the union was not to strengthen, but to display his original power.

"Like your seal? It isn't something impossible, but for what reason would they do such a— Ayato!"

When he returned his gaze, after being startled by Julis' voice, Ardi was heading towards them as he positioned a large gun.

That was—

"Now, take this! This is my Walneil Hammeeeeerrrrrrrrrr!"

The head of the hammer was launched with a shock strong enough shake the air.

"Julis, hold on!"

As Ayato drew Julis close to him, he greatly jumped to the side.

While being stirred up by the blast and rolling on the ground, Ayato and Julis immediately stood up and fixed their stances. When looking at it, the area where the hammer hit directly was gouged out.

"The power of that also seems to have increased..."

In addition to the fact that it was a really destructive power, like this, even if they avoided a direct hit, it looked like they would receive considerable damage by just being caught in the blast.

"Fuhahahahaha! Come on, I can still keep going!"

After Ardi caught the hammer head, which had come back to the handle, he prepared to shoot again without a moment's pause.

"What's more, a rapid-fire (successive discharges)...!?"

"Run, Julis!"

Ayato and Julis began to run around the outer circumference of the stage. As if chasing them, explosions occurred behind them many times.

"Though it's late to ask, isn't there any strategy?"

"Don't be absurd! If I could at least do something about that defensive barrier, it's not as if there isn't something we can do, but...."

Although searching for their next move while running, it was, as expected, difficult with this much of a difference in power.

"Hmm... As expected unlike Rimsi, I am not very good at shooting. It will not easily hit. —No, wait."

Then Ardi, who just thought of a good idea, laughed loudly.

"Fuhahahahahahaha! That's right! In that case, how about this?"

At the same time as Ardi loudly said that, the hammer was launched.

"W-What!?"

Even though they hurriedly changed the direction, multiple defensive barriers were already deployed to surround them.

"Like this, you cannot easily dodge!"

At the same time as Ardi loudly said so, the hammer was launched.

"Kuh...!"

"Eeih...! Bloom proudly, Great Crimson Heart Blazing Shield(Anthurium)!"

Although Julis promptly manifested a shield of flames, it was easily broken, and Ayato concentrated Prana to protect Julis. A shock, which tore at their limbs, assaulted them and their visions became dark for an instant. Thrown against the Battle-Stage defense wall, his bones creaked, and it was as if all his internal organs had been crushed.

"Guh..."

(This is how it is when one invests all the Prana to the defense, huh...)

While wiping blood on his lips, Ayato totteringly (unsteadily) stood up.

"Julis... are you all right?"

"Yes, somehow since you protected me... Sorry, you saved me."

It looked like Julis also sustained considerable damage, but she somehow stood up and smiled wryly.

That said, it would be probably impossible to endure once again that attack just now.

"Hohou~u, you receive that direct hit, and you still stand, huh... as expected!"

Though Ardi praised so, he retrieved the Hammer head which came back, and set it up once again. One could understand that power gathered there.

(Now it came to this, I must at least be prepared for mutual defeat...!)

Even if Ayato was defeated, they would win as long as Julis remained. He did not think that he could break that defensive barrier even if he went towards it with the risk of being defeated, but it was much better than being defeated like this without doing anything.

Just when Ayato resolved himself for it and positioned his sword—

『"How overwhelming, Player Ardi's power! Now, finally this final will come to its... wait, eeeeh!? Hey!?"』

『"Uwaaaaaaaah! What is it, what is it?"』

Confused voices suddenly resounded from the live reporter seat.

And just after that, in a familiar voice different from both the live reporter's and the commentator's;

『"—Errr, ahem. Ayato, Julis, do you hear?"』

That calm, yet gentle voice was without doubt Claudia's.

『"Flora is safe. So rest assured. And — fight to your heart's content."』

One could see that Ayato, Julis, Ardi and even the whole hall were dumbfounded for an instant.

『"Fufufu, well then, please excuse me."』

『"Come again!? Just n-now, that was Seidoukan Academy student council president, right!?"』

『"Ah, yes, it was... It was Ms. Claudia Enfield, I think."』

Both the live reporter and the commentator were still confused about the sudden intruder. And all the more so since they did not understand at all the meaning of her speech.

However, Ayato and Julis looked at each other's faces and burst into laughter.

"Puh, Hahahahaha! Geez, that girl, no matter how you put it, she is too reckless!"

"To think that she would barge in the live reporter seat expressly just to communicate with us..."

That said, it was also a fact that there was no other way than that to communicate with the players during a match. If one were follow the rules of the Festa, there might be some sort of censure, but Claudia, surely aware of that, had done it for Ayato and Julis.



"Now then, we can't afford to lose after she went as far as to do it."

"Also for Saya's and Kirin-chan's sake."

Ayato said that and took an activation body from the holder on his waist.

Since those two girls did it, next was their turn.

"Hmm, I don't know what it was just now... but, I will just merely fully use my power!"

Ardi fixed the aim of his hammer to Ayato and Julis and the Hammer head begun to rotate with an intense force.

"Walneil Hammer, fire!"

The hammer head which was released with a heavy low-pitched sound approached them at high speed.

But, Ayato calmed down and activated his Ogre Lux which lit up it's deep crimson Ulm Mana Dite.

"...Ok, lets go, Ser-Versta."

He said to the pure white blade, with a jet black pattern that surrounded it.

As the large blade of its huge single edge bisected the Hammer head with one swing, it also cut all the defensive barriers which surrounded Ayato and Julis.

"—It's the beginning of the counterattack."

- ψ -

"Can't you do anything, Ernesta?"

Meanwhile in Allekant's watching booth, Camilla was pressing Ernesta (for an answer).

"Well, even if you say that."

"Even you understand, don't you? The increasing rate of these numbers isn't normal! We should stop him as soon as possible!"

Compared to Camilla's serious expression, Ernesta's expression on the other hand was really loose.

"Even you understand, don't you Camilla? Since the limit control has been already transferred by Rimsi, we can no longer do anything at this point."

"There is still the forced outage, right?"

In all puppets, for emergency one was obligated to put a function so as to shut down all the functions from the outside. Ardi was not an exception.

"Hey stop it! Do you ask me to forcibly shut out my own child?"

However, it will give damage to the nucleus part (nerve center) of puppets, and irreparable damages were more likely to occur in the software than in the hardware.

"You should do so if necessary. You have that responsibility."

"Responsibility. Huh."

As Ernesta said that monotonously, she turned to face Camilla with a slightly serious face.

"You know, I may not look like this, but I earnestly believe."

"Believe, you say? In what? In the you that created them?"

Ernesta just shrugged her shoulders without replying.

Camilla glared at such Ernesta for a while, but she greatly sighed before long and sat on the chair.

"...I think that it's a reckless gamble though."

"Fufufu, I said it before, right? That the life is a series of gambles."

"But, there is no existing human being who keeps winning."

To Camilla who admonished as she gave up, Ernesta chuckled and answered.

"Well, that's true. But, isn't it precisely why it's interesting?"

- ψ -

As Ayato set up Ser-Versta, he shortened the distance to Ardi in one movement.

Ardi faced his enemy and deployed another defensive barrier again to block Ayato, but he easily bisected it.

"I see, as expected an output of this level is nothing for you, huh... In that case!"

"Haaaaaaa!"

As Ayato jumped towards Ardi's bosom with godlike speed, he slashed with Ser-Versta from below. No matter how thick Ardi's armor was, it might as well be paper before Ser-Versta which had easily burned away that defensive barrier.

With the timing being so perfect, the current Ardi did not have any technique to defend against this blow.

— Or that should have been the case.

"Nuuuuuuuh!"

But, Ardi repelled Ayato's Ser-Versta's attack with his hammer.

"Wha...!?"

Ayato opened his eyes wide in surprise and looked closer.

Ardi's hammer head should have definitely been destroyed a little while ago.

"Fuhahahahahaha! I will be troubled if you underestimate my defensive barrier! Even if I can't defend with a single barrier, if I bundle and compress them like this, even Ser-Versta will not be able to break it easily!"

"...I see."

Certainly, in the hammer which Ardi wielded, there was something which was made up of multiple compressed layers of light barriers instead of the normal head.

"But, in that case...!"

If he refocused the barrier, which he had used for defense up until now, into a weapon then, in the end, it was no difference in having diverted the defensive barrier.

Only one stroke of sword.

It would be all right as long as it reached Ardi's school badge.

"Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooh!"

"Nuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuh!"

Ayato's Ser-Versta and Ardi's hammer violently clashed and scattered sparks.

When Ayato slashed his sword diagonally from the shoulder, Ardi parried; when Ardi mowed down the hammer, Ayato dodged it. Even after exchanging dozens of blows, both of them did not yield, not even a little.

"Fuhahahaha! It's fun! It's really fun! But, not yet! My power is not still something like this!"

—There.

"I'll be troubled if you forgot about me!"

After the dragon of flame spread its wings, it lightly soared and attacked Ardi from the sky.

"Bloom proudly — Snapping Firebloom of the Engulfing Dragon(Antirrhinum Majus)!"

As the dragon of flame spread its wings, it lightly soared and attacked Ardi from the sky.

For Ardi, who was exchanging blows with Ayato currently, there were no means to defend against it.

"Gunuh!?"

After Ardi strongly repelled Ayato's blow, he leapt back taking a distance and repositioned his hammer in order to confront the flame dragon and destroy it.

However, Ayato was not so naive as to allow it.

"Amagiri Bright Dragon Style Sword Intermediate Technique — <Six Slaughter Wasps>"

Six consecutive thrusts after taking a stance in the haze.

With this timing and this time for sure, either Ayato's Technique or Julis' dragon, Ardi should only be able to deal with one of them.

"Nuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuh! Not yeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeet!"

However as Ardi conspicuously roared loudly, blue light gushed out from all of his body.

At the same time Ayato was sent flying with a tremendous power and the dragon of flame disappeared.

(Blue light...!? I see, so that's what it is...!)

Julis rushed over to Ayato who somehow straightened his posture and managed to land.

"Are you all right, Ayato?"

"Yes, I'm all right... But, this is a little unexpected."

Ayato said that and looked at Ardi.

Ardi's roar resounded without a pause and the blue light increased its shine more and more.

An invisible power seemed to be swirling in its surroundings and one could not readily approach.

"However, what on earth is that...?"

"Julis, didn't you notice? We should have had fought against a similar opponent."

"What did you say?"

"I should have noticed it earlier. In the first place, no matter how much strong the barrier was, it shouldn't be able to exchange blows head-on against Ser-Versta. In the past, what was able to do it was..."

As if also realizing it, Julis muttered with an amazed expression.

"...Gravi-Sheath, huh."

"Exactly. If it isn't another Ogre Lux, it shouldn't be able to defend against Ser-Versta's attacks."

Ayato calmly nodded and continued.

Ser-Versta was a non-defensive demon sword which burned all creation. The Ogre Lux Gravi-Sheath owned by Irene, whom they fought in the

fourth round, was the only weapon which was able to exchange blows with Ser-Versta.

"—In other words, Ardi is probably using its Ulm Mana Dite as a power source."

Originally, the light given by Mana Dite's were always green. It was only Ulm Mana Dites which possessed peculiar colors. It's not as if a color could not be somehow applied by processing, but that blue light was clearly different.

"But... then, don't tell me, it means that Ardi himself is an Ogre Lux...?"

"Who knows? I don't know whether it's correct to call him that, but... At least, we could presume that that is its ability defensive barrier."

In any case, that would explain everything.

It was because the fusion turned (invested) the Ulm Mana Dite's power into output — rather, it was probably intended to restrain (hold down) the overly powerful output of the Ulm Mana Dite by the use of multiple Mana Dites. If that's the case, the parts received from Rimsi were probably the control unit.

"Wait! Then, the current Ardi, could rampage—!?"

As she recalled the scene with Irene's battle, Julis turned pale. Certainly, the current situation was quite close to the time when Gravi-Sheath rampaged.

But, Ayato thought differently.

"No, it is certainly sure that that power isn't easily managed, but Ardi is probably..."

Just as Ayato said that, Ardi's roar suddenly stopped.

The force field, which had been rampaging so much, disappeared as well and a sudden silence fell on the stage.

However, only the blue light which overflowed from Ardi's body did not disappear and it even seemed to increase in strength.

"...Fu, fuhahahahaha! I see! So, this is my power! It is no wonder that Master warned us!"

"Perhaps, did he control it...?"

Julis opened her eyes wide in surprise, but Ayato, though vaguely, had expected that it was probably like that..

The Ogre Lux, by the affinity between its user and itself — in other words by the compatibility rating — depended on how much power could be drawn out. If so, then Ernesta should have taken this into consideration.

Though only a guess, even this personality of Ardi was probably something adjusted in accordance with the personality of the Ulm Mana Dite.

However—

"Now, though regrettable, we shall soon put an end to this." Ardi said.

On the armor of Ardi, upon closer inspection, there were countless cracks. The blue light also began to leak from there.

The body of Ardi could not endure the output of the Ulm Mana Dite.

"Here I come!"

But, as Ardi once again built the hammer with defensive barriers, he rushed without taking a stance.

Ayato put Ser-Versta in a horizontal position to meet it.

"Nuuuuuuuuuh!"

"Guh!"

That blow was clearly faster and heavier than when they exchanged blows a little while ago.

Although managing the huge hammer in his hands should be difficult, the overwhelming output and his learning ability surpassed it.

Probably for that reason, after exchanging dozens of blows, Ayato was beginning to gradually get pushed back.

Tough not to the extent of Ardi's hammer, since Ayato's Ser-Versta was also quite big, it was not easy to handle it effectively. Following the speed of the current Ardi was the most he could do.

(At this rate, I will be overwhelmed soon...!)

"Ayato, step back!"

Julis' sharp voice struck his ears.

Ayato, who immediately guessed her intention, blocked the hammer which was deflected downwards with the flat part of Ser-Versta's blade and leapt back with that momentum.

"Fufufu! Did you set a trap or something again? All right, I will show you that any kind of techniques will no longer work on the current me!"

"Hou, you said it right? Then, fully taste this!"

As Julis swung downward Aspera Spina, a huge magic circle emerged at Ardi's feet.

"Come out — Great Sparkling Bomb Ring Flower(Rafflesia)!"

At that moment, a flame flower of a tremendous size manifested before Ardi's eyes and swelled up.

However—

"Fuhahahahahaha! Look! With the current me, even something like this is possible!"

Defensive barriers locked it up from every direction so as to crush its petals.

Ardent flames and blast raged within that box, but the defensive barriers did not waver at all.

"Impossible..."

Julis muttered with an astonished face.

It was no wonder, since this large Great Sparkling Bomb Ring Flower was the technique with the highest heat even among Julis' setting-type abilities. It had also been outdone by Gravi-Sheath before, but even then it was only prevented locally. If it was completely blocked, the shock would be probably big, as well.

"Then, I shall return the favor!"

As Ardi held up his palms, this time he overlapped the defensive barriers and deployed them into a huge sphere. And enormous energy was

gathered within. He would probably pour all of the output of the Ulm Mana Dite into it.

Ardi tightly grasped his hands, and before long the sphere was quickly compressed and settled it into his fist.

"Don't tell me...!"

Ayato's intuition informed him of a danger of high level — but, he could do nothing about it.

"Now, burst open!"

As Ardi opened his fist, the compressed energy was released all at once.

It was a huge explosion big enough to drag the whole stage into it. Of course, there was no way out of it.

"—"

Everything went white by a flash of light, and Julis' scream was drowned out by a thunderous sound.

Ayato who was blown away like a piece of trash was about to lose consciousness for an instant due to the force impact, but fortunately, the acute pain which ran throughout his body forced him to stay awake.

"Guh..."

Ayato, who was knocked down, somehow managed to raise his body and checked out the situation. Although his uniform, made of composite fibers, was torn all over, his school badge was safe with only a couple scratches as if he partly protect it unconsciously.

He was relieved but as he raised his gaze, his expression unconsciously hardened.

The stage, which spread before his eyes, was completely destroyed.

The ground had been gouged into a crater, and the artificial soil used for shock absorption was completely blown away.

Even on the Battle-Stage's defense walls, which were protecting the audience, sparks were scattering here and there.

Just one point, a little section at the center of explosion, remained intact.

Multiple defensive barriers layered in a dome around Ardi, who stood there.

(Even if it was in the center of that explosion, is he unscathed...?)

If so, then the solidity of the defensive barrier might be able to endure Ser-Versta's offensive ability. It might have been different if Ayato could draw all the power of Ser-Versta, but it may not be equal to that of the current Ardi who was able draw out all the power of his Ulm Mana Dite.

"Fuhahahaha! Now, now, let's continue! I have not yet..."

However, after only saying that much, he suddenly fell to his knees.

"Hmm...?"

Was it disintegration due to the high output of the Ulm Mana Dite? From both his legs, blue sparks scattered.

It did not seem to be that big a deal, but thanks to that, it gave enough time, even if only a little, for Ayato to fix his stance.

As expected, if he was chased in this situation, he would not get away.

"Ayato, are you safe...?"

When turning her face with weak voice, Julis just raised her body behind Ayato.

However, an anguished expression surface on Julis' face and she immediately fell down again.

"Julis!"

"I-I'm all right... is what I would like to say, but as expected it's been a little tough..."

Even though she was helped up by Ayato, Julis, completely exhausted, just floated a wry smile.

"To be honest... do you think that we still have a chance of winning?"

"...It isn't like there's none, but..."

For example, if they gained time as is, the possibility that Ardi would self-destruct was high.

But it was not likely that Ayato and Julis would be able to hold on until then. After all, they already had wounds all over their bodies. They still have enough Prana, but most of the damages accumulated were draining Ayato's physical strength and he was reaching his limit.

It would probably be enough to be able to exchange at most dozens of blows at full power.

"That plan isn't too realistic... Anything else?"

"If I could at least surpass him in speed, I would go for a bout..."

Under the present condition where he too fell behind in sword speed, even desperate (suicidal) tactics could not be used.

Just as a side-note, there was also meteor arts, but even with the power increased, because the sword blade would become larger, the sword speed would drop further. In that case, it would not even be able to hit the current Ardi.

"Speed, huh..."

As Julis thought of something, she suddenly lifted her head.

"I recall having heard from Claudia before that Ser-Versta originally takes the most suitable form for its user. But, I don't think that this form is like that. If you can somehow do something about it, wouldn't it improve a little?"

"Even if you say that..."

"Didn't you make it grow bigger when you used the meteor arts? The point (idea) is probably the same."

She said it plainly, but at that time, he had just merely poured Prana into it.

"I'm extremely bad at small adjustments of Prana."

"Hmm..."

After a little thought, Julis resolved herself and told Ayato;

"—Understood. Then, I will handle it."

"Eh?"

"Allow me to touch Ser-Versta for a little while."

With a sidelong glance to the surprised Ayato, Julis stretched her hand to Ser-Versta which Ayato was holding.

"W-Wait—!"

"Kuh...!"

Julis who touched Ser-Versta however removed her hand immediately. Even though she had touched for only a short time, her palm had been thoroughly burnt.

"Fufufu... as expected, It's hard to deal with. It doesn't even let those whom it does not approve of touch it, huh... Well either way, I, being a Strega, am not able to handle this guy anyways."

Most of the people with ability such as Dante and Strega could not use an Ogre Lux. It was something which Julis herself said before.

"Well, it's fine. That now was enough. —Ayato, try to use the meteor arts."

"Meteor arts? In this state?"

Urged by Julis who nodded, Ayato poured Prana into Ser-Versta which he held into his right hand.

As if responding to it, Ser-Versta's edge extended and the sword blade lengthened.

Julis softly put her right hand on Ayato's right hand.

"Julis...?"

"Bloom proudly — Ornament King Flower of Blazing Bindweeds(Alexandrite)!"^[22]

Soon after, Julis' Prana ran through Ayato's right arm, and flame was lit as it coiling around Ser-Versta blade

"This is...?"

"It was originally a technique for allowing a weapon be clad in flames, but this time I will assist your Prana adjustment through this. Anyways, you should just pour Prana into this guy."

"U-Understood...!"

Anyways, he believed in Julis and did as she said; Ser-Versta, which was expanding until now, suddenly stopped.

"Ayato, visualize it — The form, the size and the appearance, the ideal Ser-Versta which you are the most comfortable with."

"..."

Ayato silently visualized (imagined) it.

Then, Julis' flame, which surrounded the sword blade in spiral-shaped pattern, thinly stretched as if tightening it, and began to follow the black pattern on Ser-Versta.

The Ulm Mana Dite, which was the core, increased its shine, raised a groan and shuddered.

Before long, Ser-Versta changed to a thin, flexible form — it was fixed to a form slightly bigger than Kirin's Senbakiri. On its sword blade, the black pattern and the flames were alternately intertwined, making it amazingly beautiful.

"Phew... we've done it. This is your —Amagiri Ayato's— Ser-Versta."

Julis took a deep, heavy breath and weakly laughed.

"This is..."

"This is as much as I can help you for this match. I leave the rest to you, Ayato."

"...Roger that, Julis."

As Ayato gently lay down Julis, he turned Ser-Versta to Ardi with one swing.

"Sorry, did I keep you waiting?"

"No, I was also in a somewhat bad condition, you see. I was performing emergency measures."

Ayato slowly advanced to the center of the Battle-Stage — though still calling it the stage, it was already only the leftovers after the soil and the fragments of the stage had been blown off and scattered.

From the opposite side, Ardi likewise advanced calmly, and the moment that they stepped into each other's range—

Both of them shortened the distance all at once and clashed in the center of the stage.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

With a war cry, Ayato swung down Ser-Versta in a straight line.

(Amazing...! It's incredibly light and it fits perfectly in my hand!)

In terms of bodily sensation (sensorily), the sword speed seemed to have doubled.

Ardi barely blocked it with the hammer, but that moment, the hammer head constructed of defensive barriers flew off. It had not burnt, but melted by the heat and popped.

"What...!?"

As expected, even Ardi raised a voice of surprise, but he immediately reconstructed the hammer head and swung it downward from an overhead position.

Even if Ayato recovered his speed and was now above in terms of weapon power, if he was to receive even one hit, it would be over. In addition, Ayato did not possess enough physical strength to keep exchanging blows.

(I will decide the match here...!)

As Ayato dodged it with the smallest margin, he aimed at the school badge on Ardi's chest and let out a thrust with all his might but—

Before that, Ardi's blow swung downward had crushed the floor of stage.

"Kuh—!"

As he jumped back in order to escape from the large hole opened at his feet, Ardi who sprouted the flight unit on both his shoulders moved at high speed in the sky and attempted to grab Ayato.

"I got you!"

However, Ayato used the hammer as a stepping stone, at the same time the Battle-Stage was further blown away with force to squash even the wind, and flew even higher.

Even he thought that he made movements which exceeded the limits, he had enough conviction to make it possible for the current him.

He jumped off a large fragment which was blown into the air by using the state of "cognition", and sneaked around to Ardi's back in the sky.

"Nuuuuuuuuuh! I will not let you do that!"

The blue light emitted from Ardi's body further increased its shine, and the flight unit rotated his body with a force as powerful as a rocket. At the same time, Ardi swung his hammer for a strike from the side.

However—

"Amagiri Bright Dragon Style' Hidden Technique — <Moon of Bloodshed>!"

However, Ayato had reach Ardi's bosom a moment earlier.

At the same time that Ardi's hammer smashed the fragment which he used as scaffold (footing), Ser-Versta traced a sword slash that resembled a half-moon.



Both of them who passed by each other in the air and fell to the ground, their landings sent up smoke flashily.

"Haa... Haa..."

The physical strength of Ayato, who fell on his back and had been exceeding his limits long ago... could no longer even stand up let alone swing his sword.

What came into view was only a dazzling light which shone on him from the far away ceiling.

He did not know if his sword even reached Ardi.

Without even the physical strength to check, what reached Ayato's ears was the mechanical voice that told him the conclusion.

"Ernesta Kühne, badge broken."

"End of the battle! Winner, Amagiri Ayato & Julis-Alexia Van Riessfeld!"

As the whole hall fell silent, the laughter of a very human machine resounded.

"Fuhahahahahahahahahahahahahahaha! —It is my complete defeat!"

He soon heard the applause like wavelets from here and there which changed into explosively loud cheering all at once.

『"F-Finally! Finally the conclusion! After an intense, fierce battle, it is the contestants Amagiri and Riessfeld of Seidoukan Academy who have reined in this Phoenix!"』

『"Haah, I watched it. It was a splendid match suitable for a final!"』

Cheers, applause, ovations, whistles and the voices of live reporter and commentator.

As various sounds and voices poured down to him, Ayato slowly closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Chapter 7 - Post-night Festival

Because the Battle-Stage of the Sirius Dome became unavailable for use, the awards ceremony and closing ceremony were hurriedly transferred to the Procyon Dome. Since unlike the opening ceremony, the attending students were limited, it was said that there would be no problem even if the location became somewhat small.

Actually, since it was only the winner and runner-ups who attended the awards ceremony, the comfort of Ayato who had to stand in the stage was very bad. After all, Julis had been carried to the Medical Center immediately after the final, and Ardi who was the runner-up had also been taken to the laboratory by Ernesta. In other words, standing now in the stage of this awards ceremony were only Ayato, Camilla and Rimsi.

On the other hand, the audience seating was overflowing with people to the extent that it was tightly packed. There was also the fact that the awards ceremony and closing ceremony were entrance-free (there were admission restrictions though), but customarily, it seemed that if the final was lively, the more lively it was, the more that number would increase. In such an interpretation, it would be said that the match of Ayato and company satisfied the audience.

"—Even judging from the above-mentioned things, I think that one can understand just how wonderful this Phoenix was. Especially, although the exceptional measures regarding the two of Allekant Academy were strictly provisional, it will be important regarding the future rules enactment..."

On the platform, the Steering Committee Chairman Madiath Mesa was speaking general comments about this tournament. Whereas the greetings of the opening ceremony were mainly turned towards the students, the speech now was turned to the audience and televiewers. Probably for that reason, his tone was also somewhat formal.

As Ayato was somehow looking at the Student Council Presidents of each academy lined up on the platform, his eyes met those of one among them — the student council president of Queen Veil Girl's Academy for an instant.

Then, Sylvia slightly smiled and sent a wink teasingly. Though Ayato was shocked (surprised), Sylvia soon removed her gaze.

The feeling that that girl was the real Sylvia Ryuneheim sprung out now, but there were also several persons beside her who were looking at Ayato. It was the student council presidents of St. Garrardsworth Academy and World Dragon Seventh Institute. Especially, the student council president of World Dragon looked at Ayato with strangely glittering eyes, and it was a little scary.

Contrastively, the student council president of Le Wolfe Black Institute Dirk Eberwein didn't even try to look Ayato's way. There was no evidence that the matter of this time was Dirk's doing, but they could only wait for the investigation of the Hunter Guards about this.

It was said that at the time when Claudia received the information that Flora was rescued, she contacted the Hunter Guards. In the winner interview after the final, Claudia accompanied Ayato instead of Julis, but the matter of Flora was suddenly disclosed there. Naturally, there was a great uproar in the press conference room as if someone had stirred up a beehive, and due to that, the time of interview was greatly extended. This awards ceremony was originally scheduled to be held from the evening, but it had completely grown dark already outside.

By the way, Claudia said that the Hunter Guards were very angry that she had not contacted them when the kidnapping was confirmed.

"Well then, I will call the winner and runner-up of the 24th Phoenix. —You three, please come here."

When they were called by Madiath and went up to the platform, huge applause arose from the audience seat.

"First of all, I praise here the superior technology and strong will of both Camilla Pareto and Ernesta Kühne — as well as the good fight of both players Ardi and Rimsi. Congratulations for the second place."

As Madiath said so and shook hands with Camilla, he handed her a big trophy.

"It is an honor, Chairman."

"Thanks to you guys, it would be no exaggeration to say that a new history was engraved in the Festa again. We must always continue evolving. For that purpose, talents like you guys are indispensable. Do your best in the future as well."

Madiath faced Rimsi next and similarly exchanged handshakes with her.

"I don't know how the treatment of puppets in the future Festas will turn out, but your activity will definitely have a great meaning."

"...I appreciate your words." Rimsi answered with her usual unchanged calm expression.

"And, I praise here the bright glory, indomitable fighting spirit and brilliant victory of Amagiri Ayato and Julis-Alexia van Riessfeld. —Congratulations for the championship."

"Thank you."

Madiath's strong hand suddenly grasped Ayato's hand.

"Though it seems that there was an unexpected disturbance in the final, you guys who pulled through the fight without losing to it are surely suitable to receive this trophy. We of the Steering Committee also intend to fully cooperate with the Hunter Guards and strive to investigate the truth. We will never tolerate something like that again, so I would like you to feel at ease."

"...Thank you for your consideration."

The crest of hexagon which was Asterisk's symbol was carved on the trophy. It was even bigger than the trophy which Camilla had received, and very heavy.

"Personally, I found your match really interesting. I'm looking forward to seeing your activity again in the next Festa."

"Y-Yes..."

As Madiath nodded with a smile, he put his hand on Ayato's shoulder and urged him to turn around.

When turning around in response to it, the reporters of media gathered as they surrounded the platform.

"Now! A Grand applause for them who gave us the best excitement and impression!"

Receiving Madiath's voice, thunderous cheers and applause arose from all over the hall.

It was the most grand and enthusiastic ovation since the beginning of the Phoenix until now. It was a storm of applause which poured from all the 360°.

Although Ayato was perplexed at how he should respond to it, he felt a sense of accomplishment which exceeded some mountains.

After finishing the awards ceremony, Ayato returned to the waiting room with Claudia.

"So what would you do after this? Just so you know, there's a reception, but you are not particularly required to participate."

"In that case, I want to go the Medical Center. I want to see Julis' and Kirin-chan's conditions."

Though Julis also received considerable damages, Kirin seems to be more seriously injured. It was not life-threatening, but even with the technology of the Medical Center and the resilience (recovery power) of a Starpulse Generation, hospitalization was necessary for several days.

That only showed how desperate she was in order to save Flora.

—And.

"...Ayato."

Saya who was standing in front of the waiting room saw Ayato and ran up to him.

"Congratulations for the championship. As one would expect of my Ayato."

"It's thanks to Saya and Kirin-chan. Thank you."

As Ayato said so, Saya, unusually embarrassed, shook her head.

"...No, It wasn't my power alone. Kirin, Yabuki and MacPhail have also helped."

"Lester?"

"Uh huh."

When Saya pointed behind her, a conspicuously large back peeped out from the shadow of a pillar.

"Thank you, Lester. You really helped us."

"There's really no reason to thank me! I was just threatened by that bastard Yabuki, and I had no choice but to help!"

He returned a curt reply without even looking Ayato's way.

"Hahaha... wait, eh? Speaking of Yabuki, where is he?"

Ayato looked around, but he could not see Eishiro's figure.

"That bastard ran away in the middle of fight...! Geez, he calls someone and he himself flees... the next time I meet him, he won't get away with that."

Lester's voice was trembling with an anger he could not hide.

It looked like he quite seriously angry. It was no wonder though.

"...But sorry, Ayato. The criminal was not caught."

Saya looked downward with a despondent face.

"It's nothing to apologize for. Anyway, the most important is that everyone was safe."

He had already heard from Claudia, although the criminal who kidnaped Flora was repelled by Saya and Kirin, it seemed that he disappeared before they knew about it.

It meant that he had escaped at the opening when they were in a hurry about Kirin's injury and the hurried contact to Claudia, but Ayato did not mind that much at that point.

Of course, if the criminal was caught, they might have been able to pursue Le Wolfe which was probably pulling the strings behind the scenes, but more than that, the fact that Saya, Flora and company were safe was much happier.

"Ah, by the way, we are on our way to the Medical Center now, but Saya, Lester, what will you do?"

"...I'm going, too. Kirin was stout-hearted, but her wound was not superficial. I'm worried about whether she's all right."

Saying so, Saya knitted her eyebrows as she was anxious.

"I'm going back. I tag along with you till there after all."

Lester, still with his back turned on Ayato and company, lightly raised his hand and left, but he suddenly stopped on the way.

"That's right — well, um, I'll just say congratulations."

As he said so, this time for sure — somehow, at a quick pace— he left.

"Fufufu, even MacPhail-kun is not honest, eh... Well then, let's find a means of transport until we reach the Medical Center. Please wait a little."

Claudia took out her portable terminal and began to contact somewhere.

When making mindless exchanges with Saya about the finals while waiting for it (transportation)—

"...Hmm?"

Saya suddenly turned her gaze to the back of the passage.

"Ah..."

When Ayato also looked that way, Camilla and Rimsi were coming over to this place.

"...What do you want?"

"—I take back the words of the other day."

At Camilla's words, Saya stared in wonder.

"...I don't understand. It was Ayato and Julis who defeated you. We lost."

"I am not talking about the final, but yesterday's match. You and Professor Sasamiya's lux had surpassed this Rimsi. That's clear for anyone who saw the match."

"...But, I wasn't able to win against Ardi."

Camilla said with the same expression as Saya who muttered in frustration.

"I think that you guys have already realized, but Ardi's defensive barrier is something which emulated the ability of an Ulm Mana Dite. That's a defense system which I can say with confidence to be my greatest masterpiece, but... Ardi at the time of the fusion is different. Ardi in that

state gets energy directly from the Ulm Mana Dite and uses its ability. In other words, it is not very different than using an ogre lux. And, the ideal of us, the Lion Faction(Ferrovius) is incompatible to something unstable like an ogre lux."

As Camilla sighed there, she slowly shook her head.

"Thus, I personally don't recognize that as a victory."

"But..."

"It looked like it is not only me who think so." Camilla said and stepped aside as if turning over.

Coming to the front, in her stead, was Rimsi. "Sasamiya Saya. I wish for a rematch with you."

"A rematch...?"

"Well, since in the current situation, the autonomous type puppets can't afford to duel at their own convenience, I don't know when it would be though..."

Saya who had heard it with a blank face suddenly (with a puff) loosen her lips before long.

"Understood. If it's the case, the revocation of those words of yours will have to be put on hold until then."

"...What do you mean?"

This time, Camilla asked back as she was surprised.

"I also have my pride. I also don't think that as a victory."

"But..."

"Don't worry. Next time, I will crushingly defeat you completely and clinch the decision."

As Saya said and chuckled, Camilla also floated a light smile.

"...I see. Then, we shall do so."

"—Yes."

Only Rimsi had a calm expression, but for some reason Ayato felt like he saw a strong fighting spirit there.

- ψ -

The underground block of Asterisk was the jurisdiction of the Institution Maintenance Department, and a periodic inspection was performed at a considerable frequency. Hence, it was unsuitable for a criminal to hide himself, but it is not as if there weren't exceptions.

For example, in case when one perfectly knew the route and the period of that periodic inspection.

Even so, it was impossible to hide, but if it was at least to be used as an escape route, then there was no problem.

That man, who languidly hung down both his arms, while being soaked in water up to his knees, was quietly advancing through the drainage channel which frequently branched off, like a maze. Although a small light was mounted to the surface of a wall, at a space considerably away, one could hardly see well enough ahead with that light.

Even so, the man's pace had not let up, but he suddenly stopped.

"He~e, I'm amazed that you were able to run to such a far off place with that body."

"..."

The voice which echoed was improperly bright and light.

"Black Cat Institute(Grimalkin), gold eye No 7. If I'm not mistaken, your name is... Oh, I remember, was it Werner?"

As the man —Werner— turned around, a youth floating a friendly smile was standing within the very dim light.

"That scar on your cheek... I know you. You're the Ninja of the Shadow Star."

"Oh dear, it makes me happy that you know about me." The youth casually approached Werner without even showing signs of being cautious.

"Of course, I would know you. An oddball fellow in the same trade, it would immediately become a rumor." There was no emotion in Werner's voice,

and only an inhuman coldness could be felt. "It looks like you're doing whatever you please. Seidokan will certainly have a headache, too."

"Hahaha, coming from a pro like you, there are no words to return." As the youth expressed a wry smile, he continued with a quite indifferent tone.

"But — it'd be boring to move just as I'm told, right?"

"You... by whose orders are you moving?"

"Well, I wonder." In the youth's expression, just a little, a slightly dangerous color blurred.

At that moment, a thorn which jumped out from the youth's shadow pierced his chest — or so it looked like it.

However, there was only the youth's uniform skewered there and the youth's figure was nowhere to be found.

"—It's called substitution's technique."

"!"

That voice was immediately heard from behind, but Werner could not turn around. A hot shock ran throughout his abdomen and a tepid fluid ran up the throat.

Werner who collapsed just like that into the drainage channel raising a loud splash.

If there was enough light, one would probably see that a red color which dyed the water was spreading.

As the youth lightly swung the kunai in his hand and swept off the blood, he turned towards the man.

"That's why I rejected the invitation of the Black Cat Institute(Grimalkin)."

As the youth picked up his pierced uniform, he plainly frowned.

"Damn... that was a brand-new one..."

- ψ -

—Allekant Academy Research Center Block.

"Hohoho, this is awful. It won't be good if I don't perform an overhaul, from the basic frame up." Ernesta, who was working on Ardi's repair in her laboratory, said with a really happy tone contrary to her drastic words.

"Fuhahahahaha! Well, it might be so!"

With all his limbs removed in a work room, behind a strengthened and hard glass wall, Ardi appeared to only have his head and chest... he heartily laughed.

"But, when it comes to only the materials which can withstand the output of the Ulm Mana Dite, I have no choice but to rebuild them from scratch. Even if I ask for their development from the guys of the Black Woman Faction(Sonnet), it will take considerable time... Ardi, I'll have you bear with a temporary assembled body for a while." (Honestly "black woman" faction sounds weird but if that's what it is then it can't be helped lol)

"Umu! There is no helping it!"

"Then, first of all— what, what?"

Just at a point when she was about to start a full-scale assembly work, Ernesta's portable terminable informed her of a call.

"Oh my, oh my..."

Ernesta satisfactorily laughed and opened a space window, after cutting off the background sound of the work room.

"Hey there, Your Excellency, the Tyrant, good day. What business do you have with me at this time?"

『"...Tch, what a disagreeable (sarcastic) woman."』

The plump young man projected on the space window responded to Ernesta's greetings by clicking his tongue.

"No—, but, but, the gift you took the trouble to give me, when I opened the lid, it was empty—"

『"Shut up, damned woman. Isn't it the responsibility of your junks who weren't able to take advantage of this rare chance?"』

To Ernesta who loosely bent back and forth her body, Dirk spat so out.

"It isn't really like I ask you anything—."

『"Hmph! ...Well, it's fine, let's go to the main subject. Can I hear your reply for what I ask you the other day?"』

"Reply?" Ernesta asked back with a blank face.

『"About whether or not you cooperate with us."』

"Ah! That, huh. Of course, the answer is NO." She crossed her arms before her hands and greatly formed an X-mark. "As expected, you guys really have bad hobbies."

『"I can say the same for you."』 Dirk glared at Ernesta with an extremely unpleasant face.

『"But... I wonder if you'll be able to complete your third puppet like that."』

"__"

Soon after, the atmosphere which Ernesta wore became tense.

Her expression remained a smiling face without change, but only just a little, her eyes became sharp.

"Hmm — I see, you're really something. Even though I haven't yet told even Camilla about her... Should I say as expected of Le Wolfe?"

『"You didn't find any compatible Ulm Mana Dite, right? Well, it's no wonder; after all, Frauenlob is the stingiest (the most stringent) when it comes to the commercial offering of Ulm Mana Dite. It's certainly very tough to drag it out from the Research Center, right?"』

"..."

『"Well, if you'd have won in this Phoenix, it might have been different, though."』

"...So? Regarding the situation of Ulm Mana Dite, it's the same for Le Wolfe, isn't it? Seizing another empty box would be unbearable, after all."

『""Nobody said that we had to reveal it, however."』

Though Ernesta knitted her brows at that reply, she lightly laughed as she immediately realized something.

"Ah. Is this, by any chance, your wire puller?"

『"There isn't such a guy. It's a relationship in which we will lend you our strength only when we're needed. There isn't any common point between us other than having the same goal."』

"Hmm..."

As Ernesta threw in a vague response, she pondered for a while.

『"What's wrong? Give me an answer, quickly."』

"...Understood. If it's only hearing what you've to say, I'll hear it."

Even at that answer of Ernesta, Dirk, still with an irritated face, did not even grin.

『"All right. I'll contact you again."』

Before the space window which disappeared, Ernesta took a great breath.

"Well then, you never know what might happen..."

Ernesta's lips, which muttered that, were unwittingly loosening.

- ψ -

"Ah, Ayato-senpai... Ouch!"

Kirin, who recognized Ayato as he entered her hospital room, sprang up from the bed — though assumed that way, and floated an anguished expression, while holding the side of her abdomen, and stiffened.

"W-Wait Kirin-chan, don't overdo it!"

"N-No, I'm all right... this much will heal immediately." Kirin said as Ayato hurriedly ran up to her, she smiled warmly while floating a few tears at the edge's of her eyes.

"...There's no doubt that it's a serious wound. Just behave yourself." Saya said in her own earnest way.

"That's right. First of all, please rest your body slowly." Claudia mentored.

Saya and Claudia, who entered following Ayato, were also anxious about Kirin's body.

"Wah! Even Saya-san and president... Thank you for coming all the way here to visit me."

"Come on, everything is fine now, so you should lie down."

"Y-Yes..."

At Ayato's prompting, Kirin reluctantly relaxed her body and leaned back into the bed.

Though, typical of hospitals, there was another bed in the room, it was empty.

"Huh? I heard that Julis was in the same room though..."

"Ah, it seems like Julis-senpai is presently being interviewed about the details of the recent incident by the Hunter Guards, together with Flora-chan, in a separate room..."

"I see. Speaking of which, I was also asked to talk about it later."

In other words, it was an investigation.

It might be better for Ayato to also go out when he finished his business here.

At that moment, "Ah, um, Ayato-senpai.", Kirin said while looking straight into Ayato's eyes.

"Hmm?"

"Though it's a little too late, congratulations for the championship, though it was a recording, I saw the match. It was really wonderful!"

"Hahaha. Thank you. But, we were able to win because Kirin-chan and company did their best... you've really done well, Kirin-chan."

Ayato gently stroked the head of Kirin.

"N-No, I didn't really—"

At this inflection, Kirin's cheeks suddenly dyed red, and she tried to hid her face into the thin hospital futon, as she was so endearably embarrassed.

"...It was thanks to Kirin that we were able to defeat that Dante, so you should be proud of yourself. Especially, the last art of sword drawing was amazing."

"Art of sword drawing? He~e... I didn't know that there was an art of sword drawing in the Toudou Style."

As Ayato expressed his own admiration, Kirin sank more and more deeply into bed. Already, only her eyes could be seen above the covers.

"T-That was, um... it's a technique thought out by the branch family, and it isn't taught in the Toudou dojo descending from the main family... It's also the first time I succeed using it in actual combat..."

"I see... there is also a branch family by us, but there wasn't such a thing."

As expected, when it came to the structure of the Toudou Style, there were probably also a lot of troublesome things.

"Oh! M-More importantly, Ayato-senpai! In the final, what was that last technique which decided the match?"

Now that they begun to talk about sword arts, Kirin lifted her head out from the sheets and now her face shown and eyes glittered.

As expected, when it came to this topic, Kirin seemed to become a slightly different person.

"Ah, are you talking about "Moon of Bloodshed"? Just for note, that was a hidden technique, so I can't reveal its secret that much, but... it's a technique to cut the opponent when running past him without stopping on a battlefield, something like that."

Since it was a technique which could not be done unless one was flexible, it would probably be difficult with his usual Ser-Versta.

"I see... It's a technique of an old school, huh."

"Originally, most of the Amagiri Bright Dragon Style Hidden Techniques assumed a one-vs-many battle scenario, but this one is somehow an exception."

"—By the way."

As they had such a heated discussion about sword fighting, Claudia suddenly said so.

"There is something about which I would also like to ask Ayato, but is it all right?"

"Eh? Uh huh, it's all right, but... what is it?"

"I noticed it at the time of the awards ceremony, but when did you become friends with the student council president of Queen Veil?"

"Wha!?"

The surprised Ayato and Saya and Kirin looking at Ayato with a more surprised face.

"By student council president of Queen Veil, you mean... eh?
Eeeeeeeeeeh!?"

"...The Melodious Witch(Sigrdrífa), friends with Ayato?"

"N-No. Rather than being friends with her, I only got to know her recently..."

To Ayato who became flustered, Claudia expressed her usual smile.

"—Ara, so you know each other after all."

"Ah..."

Shit. I was tricked.

"You tricked me, Claudia..."

As she said so reproachfully, Claudia teasingly shook her shoulders.

"Fufufu, sorry. But, it's something which I wanted to know no matter what."

"C-Certainly, it's worrisome! Why is that Sylvia-san is friends with Ayato-senpai?"

"...Geez, when it comes to Ayato... Geez!"

"E-Errr, that's, you see..."

Since he had he made a promise with Sylvia, the truth could not be talked about.

(Having said that, how should I deceive them...?) As Ayato was desperately thinking about something while the three girls' gazes gathered on him—

"What on earth are you doing, you guys...?"

The entrance door to the room opened and Julis and Flora entered.

"Ah, Julis. Is the interview with the Hunter Guards over?"

Like a brief godsend, Ayato waved to Julis, if only because of the change of topic.

"Yea. No matter how fiendish a man Dirk Eberwein is, I had replied back fluently."

Julis said so with a refreshed face.

"That's fine, but... Julis, hospitalization is also necessary for you, right? Is it really all right for you to move about this much?"

"Unlike Kirin, in my case, this was a symptom of my Prana being completely out, after all. Although it was hospitalization was needed, it was for only a day, I've already recovered considerably. Of course, there are still bruises and bone fractures, but this much isn't really... hmm? What's the matter, Flora?"

Flora, who was still standing at the entrance of the room with her head hung down, did not try to enter.

Even so, when Julis called out to her, she raised her head as if making up her mind.

"U-Um, everyone! This time because of Flora, you had big trouble...!"

"Hardly. It isn't as if Flora-chan really did something bad, so you shouldn't mind it." Ayato hurriedly comforted her.

Looking at Flora, tightly grasping her skirt and with a face which seemed to burst into tears at any time, who said. "B-But, Amagiri-sama and Princess had a really important match... Moreover, Toudou-sama was also seriously injured..."

"I-I don't particularly mind it, so..." Although Kirin also followed up so...

Large drops of tears was piling up Flora's eyes very fast.

"Good grief..."

However to Flora, Julis said with a comforting, soft voice.

"Stop stressing yourself for nothing, Flora. You're a good child, but even so, you're still 10 years old. At time when you want to cry, you should cry honestly."

She said and lightly hit her head.

"But, but..."

"—It's all right."

"U... P, Princeee..."

At last tears begun to overflow from Flora's eyes and her face was distorted.

"Waaaaaaaahhhhh! Princeeeessss, Princeeeessssssssssss! I was scaaaaaarrrred!"

Flora clung to Julis and began to cry loudly.

"Yes... you really did your best, Flora. It's already all right."

"Waaaaaaaahhhhh!"

Flora, who cried while making a crumpled face with tears and dripping nose, was only visible as a girl suitable for her age.

Until Flora calmed down, Julis continued patting her back kindly.

- ψ -

"Well then — Ayato. Can I have a moment?"

Julis who took down Flora, who cried, got tired and ended up sleeping, on her bed pointed at the door and said.

"Yes, I don't really mind, but... where are we going?"

"What, It's immediately there."

As he followed Julis who led the way, they certainly stopped in a place just away from the room.

It was a corner for a little rest where a vending machine and a sofa were located in a line. The medical center had such places here and there, but probably because of time, it looked like there was no other user now.

"It's my treat. Choose whatever you like."

"...Then, iced coffee."

"Then, I'll take tea."

As he received the canned coffee which Julis threw, its coldness felt good on his hand.

"—So?"

"Uh huh..."

He thought that there was something she wanted to talk about and it aroused his interest, but Julis only played with the can in her hand with a troubled face.

After a while, as he thought that she finally opened her mouth.

"No... it's certainly true that I have something to say and took you here. But, now that it has come to this, I don't know about what I should say..."

Saying so, Julis kept silent again.

With both of them, not sitting on the sofa and standing side-by-side as they leaned their back on the wall, a time of silence passed.

"—If it was not for you, I would probably not have come this far."

Before long, Julis said abruptly.

Without even looking Ayato's way, she was facing straight ahead.

"...Me, too. If not for Julis, I wouldn't have thought to come so far."

Ayato, who was similarly facing straight ahead, answered so.

"But, still this is still only one passage point. There's still a long way to go."

"I'll tag along with you. For both your and my sake."

He found what he should accomplish.

Now, he just had to advance to the next stage.

"—I see."

"...Yes."

Once again, silence fell.

However this time, it was immediately broken.

"Then for the time being, let's go with a toast."

Julis turned towards Ayato and softly laughed.

"To celebrate today's victory."

Julis said and raised her can.

"And in hope for the next victory."

Ayato said and hit his can on hers.

A low sound echoed through the silent corridor.

Epilogue

Asterisk Central District Administration Area — at its center, there was the management headquarters of the Festa.

Even in Asterisk, amongst the skyscrapers opposing one another, the Steering Committee Chairman Madiath Mesa's office was located on the highest floor.

The structure of the room was slightly similar to that of the Seidoukan student council room. One side was glassed-sided and one could overlook the whole view of Asterisk. The things which were put, whether it be sofa or office desk were probably all topnotch items, but it gave a calm impression on the whole.

In that office, Ayato and Julis were opposite to Madiath in order to receive the report regarding the incident.

"Hi, I am glad you came. Many things had happened in this Phoenix, so it took much time to settle the affairs — Ah, please sit down."

Urged by Madiath, they sat on the sofa across the table.

It was one month after the Phoenix ended. The long summer vacation was also already over and the season had moved to autumn.

"I will get to the main point without delay. Regarding the kidnapping of Miss Flora Klemm — I think that you have already heard about it, but among the Mafia groups regarded as culprit of that incident, the executive party (top brass guys) which had fled, were arrested the other day."

Madiath took a small breath there.

Ayato and Julis, with grim faces as it is, waited for the continuation of the story.

"It is the Mafia which was managing the casino where Miss Klemm was confined. Besides that, they performed illegal acts on an extensive scale, and it seems that there was also a book keeper of Phoenix-related gambling. However, with a little magnification it was revealed to be overly biased and it seemed that it would be a considerably bad situation if you guys were to actually win. That said, when one abstained from winning it will be paid back. So, what they came up with was the handicap to prevent

you from using Ser-Versta. At present, most of those guys are denying it, but some decisive evidence has been seized from the hideout."

As he spoke up to there, Madiath smiled wryly and shrugged his shoulders.

"You look like you don't agree with it at all."

"Of course. That was obviously—"

"Well, wait. Of course, even the Hunter Guards attached great importance to your testimony and they also continue the investigation along that line. However — the Dante whom Sasamiya-kun and Toudou-kun fought against has not been found at present... From my position, I want you to forgive me since I was hesitant about raising my name, but any evidence which showed the involvement of a specific academy — or of its espionage organization hasn't been found, either."

At Madiath's words, one could see that Julis chewed her molar.

"Of course, since there are also many active students of Le Wolfe among the constituents of the Mafia, judging from such a viewpoint, the responsibility of the affiliated academy can't be acquitted. Naturally punishment will be considered, and depending on the situation, a severe disposal such as point deprivation of the Festa may fall, too."

The point deprivation of the Festa would certainly be a severe punishment, but when examining it, Le Wolfe had received it many times in the past. Even if it were to happen, it would not be that much a surprise.

"Besides, I also heard that the Hunter Guards Captain is strongly interested in this matter. It seems that investigation will also be carried out sequentially, so view it as long term investigation."

"...Understood."

Julis reluctantly nodded.

Regarding this matter, Julis was already tired of getting angry.

As for Ayato, he understood Julis' feelings, above all — as it was Ayato who was aimed this time — it might rather be said that Julis and Flora were the ones dragged into it. If what Dirk did was overlooked as is, Ayato, as a person concerned, could not also forgive it.

"Even we, the Steering Committee, think that this matter is very regrettable. Currently, it is under examination, with the aim of strengthening the support for the participating players and their relatives"

Madiath said so and stood up.

"You can contact me again anytime if there is anything. If I can be of help, I will not spare any efforts to cooperate."

As Ayato took the hand which Madiath held out, Madiath's expression suddenly softened.

"By the way Amagiri, it seemed that you ask the search of your big sister as the wish for having won the Phoenix."

"Eh...? Ah, yes."

Although confused since the topic suddenly changed, Ayato nodded.

—The winner of the Festa will have any wish granted.

Though it was the Festa's sale phrase, of course in reality, there was a limit.

For example, a dead person could not be revived, and as expected there were many cases where wishes such as remarkably violating others' rights were not approved in many cases even in this era (That said, it seemed that there are any number of bypaths (loopholes) here).

Julis had demanded money, as she was saying since the beginning, but it seemed that the amount of money presented by the Integrated Enterprise Foundation was enormous.

Julis used it and repaid all the debts of the multiple orphanages in Rizeltania, and moreover, she became their right holder and the amount left over was allotted to future investment funds.

On the other hand, Ayato requested his big sister's search. Unlike Julis' wish, there was no guarantee that she would definitely be found out, but if the Integrated Enterprise Foundation searched and did not find her, then there was no longer any other means.

"If she disappeared in this Asterisk, there is surely some clue left somewhere. I pray that she is found safe."

"Thank you."

There was somewhat kindness in Madiath's words.

Though he wondered about it, Ayato bowed and left the room.

"Phew..."

Madiath who saw off Ayato and Julis sat once again on the chair.

At the same time, one of the multiple portable terminals which were there informed of a call and Madiath opened the space window.

"...Geez, thanks to you, I'm very busy here."

"Hmph! I did it in consideration for you."

The redhead young man reflected in the space window snorted as if it was boring.

"Oh dear, why do you mean by that?"

"You should know more than anyone else how frightening Ser-Versta is. What's more, that guy is that woman's younger brother. There is no doubt he will become a hindrance to the plan sooner or later."

"Even so, your move this time was too violent. I want you to have a little restraint. You might aim at killing two birds with one stone by cleaning out the dissidents of the entertainment district(Rot Licht)..."

As he softly dealt the warning, the young man deepened the wrinkles of his brows.

"There are lots I left out on purpose for times like this. There is no meaning if they aren't eventually useful. Still, on the other hand the parts add up evenly to one lost 'cat'."

"Hmm... well, it's fine. I will overlook this. By the way, what happened with her?"

"She felt inclined to hear the story, but... Did you seriously intended to draw her in? She is better than the crazy woman of the Ubermensch Faction(Tenorio), however, with her you wouldn't know how many screws will fly."

"You saw her puppets' performance, didn't you? Above all, we don't have enough manpower. Besides, she doesn't plan to divulge about the plan."

"...It's wise, eh."

"Anyway, do your best and continue the negotiations. I can't move directly after all. Well then, again—"

As Madiath said so and was about to finish the communication, the young man said as if preceding it.

"By the way, don't you still feel inclined to tell me about the relation between that woman and you?"

"Geez, that again?"

Madiath unnaturally sighed and laughed as he was troubled.

"I'm sorry, but I don't intend to tell it. It's private."

Saying so, Madiath finished the communication this time for sure.

"Geez, he is unexpectedly persistent, too..."

While muttering as he complained, Madiath operated another portable terminal.

The space window which got blackout projected once again an image. However, it was not a communication with someone. It was the image of the camera set up for monitoring.

Reflected there was the figure of one girl sleeping on a large bed.

"Well at any rate, I wonder what's to be done—"

While looking at the image of the girl who was sleeping — Amagiri Haruka, Madiath sighed once more.

References

1. ↑ she refers here to Ardi
2. ↑
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Hidden_Senbazuru_Orikata
3. ↑ an orchid species in Japan, it's called *Neofinetia falcata*
4. ↑ also means source, secret or trick about Ardi's increase of power and speed
5. ↑ that is one of the walls surrounding the stage
6. ↑ here means grow up by learning
7. ↑ Dirk called out to you her saying 'おまえ', which is a term used between close friends
8. ↑ if you remark here, this is the first time Saya calls Julis by her first name
9. ↑ and here, it's also the first time Julis called Saya and Kirin by their first names
10. ↑ http://fc04.deviantart.net/fs50/f/2009/288/3/e/Scottish_Claymore_by_Terroring96.jpg". Not sure if claymore is the right translation because it is two-handed sword, but it could be that people in this LN are strong enough to use a two-handed sword with one hand
11. ↑ he asks Ayato here that whether he was unwilling to pay the price to use the Ser-Versta (ogre Lux)
12. ↑ If you have not figured it out Rotlicht is German for Red Light anyone of you know what that implies
13. ↑ she refers to herself, meaning she's Ardi's and Rimsi's mother — creator
14. ↑ A shop sponsored salesperson who tries, by any means, to 'pull' in customers from the street.
15. ↑ the fact that he knows a lot of people
16. ↑ in the area of construction/renovations
17. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koikuchi_shirt A weak reference, but kinda gets the idea across.
18. ↑ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halberd>
19. ↑ in other words he was blackmailed

20. ↑ when she quickly understood that aiming at Ayato and Julis at this point now would be useless
21. ↑ art of drawing one's sword, cutting down one's opponent and sheathing the sword afterwards
22. ↑ 炎蔓の飾王花, please help TL this

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